Re-Working the Magic, 1978-2001

A Parallel Study
of Six Scottish Women Writers
of the late Twentieth Century:

Margaret Elphinstone, Alison Fell, Sian Hayton,
Ali Smith, Emma Tennant and Alice Thompson

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Thesis Abstract

Re-Working the Magic is a parallel study of six Scottish women writers from the late twentieth century: Margaret Elphinstone, Alison Fell, Sian Hayton, Ali Smith, Emma Tennant and Alice Thompson. The thesis analyses the fiction produced by the authors between 1978 and 2001, the publication dates of Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1978) and Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001). The time-span selected for the present study focuses on a renewed interest in a traditional theme in Scottish literature: magic.

Four tropes are identified as the main thematic vehicles of magic in the works of the six authors: ghosts; witches; doubles and magical journeys. These cultural archetypes all embody the relationship between the seen and the unseen, as in all the analysed texts magic is not a foreign concept, nor is it constricted to a parallel world. Rather than portraying marvellous otherworlds, in the analysed texts magic belongs to a world recognisable by both character and reader. The immanent aspect of magic accentuates its subversive nature: since it happens in a rationally ordered world, the irrational and inexplicable nature of magic creates tension and defies the order of the world it stems from.

Facilitated by the employment of the four archetypal tropes, the texts engage with various traditions – literature, ballad, myth – the relationship with the past tradition is facilitated through several intertextual strategies including parody, pastiche and rewriting of traditional texts, myths and folk- and fairy-tales. While links to Scottish fantasy literature and folk tradition are stressed throughout the analysis of the six authors' works, the nature of this thesis questions boundaries of nationality and gender, in view of relevant postcolonialist and feminist literary theories.

The Appendix, which includes interviews with five of the authors, endorses the investigation of questions about the meaning of Scottishness and female writing. The challenge to the patriarchal models offered by 'mainstream' tradition is a constant reminder of the need for flexibility when considering boundaries. While analysing the use of recurring magic tropes and non-realistic genres, this thesis will also approach specific issues about gender and nationality raised by the authors' texts and interviews.

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Dedicated

to the living memory of

Emanuele Scieri (1973-1999),

my guardian angel
whose wings were broken
before he could learn how to fly.

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Chapter One

Tracing the Boundaries: An Introduction to Critical Contexts and Theories of Magic

And not a dream. I know where the walls end
And begin again. I touch doors on time.
The highland roads in my mind have been redeveloped –
A few old curves still visible, like
The creases in my birth certificate from the thirties

(Robin Fulton, from 'Remembering an Island')

Tracing the Boundaries: An Introduction to Critical Contexts and Theories of Magic

1. Foreword

Magic stems from the inexplicable. Even though it is possible to be enchanted by magic phenomena as they happen, trying to disentangle the plots of magic can result in fruitless paradox. Introducing a thesis focusing on the use of magic in Scottish women's writing of the late twentieth century is a more complex task than discussing each of the six selected authors separately and in depth. The attempt to impose boundaries on what should not have any confinements and to define what cannot be articulated seems like a contradiction in terms. However, as this thesis is concerned with several angles of approach, it is important to analyse the different contexts within which the texts are found, before going into a more detailed analysis. A title tying together 'magic', 'Scottish' and 'women' openly raises questions as regards genre, nation and gender and the coexistence of different parameters triggers the necessary setting of critical and theoretical boundaries. Such boundaries may need to be flexible and open and it is only by bearing in mind concepts of flexibility and openness that notions of borders can be discussed as far as genre, nation, and gender are concerned.

The selected six authors were identified for their employment of narrative strategies and tropes, which do not belong to a *strictly* realistic genre. Each of the analysed narrative features episodes and situations which cannot be explained rationally and do not belong to realistic fiction, although the texts are all set in the 'real' world. In other words, although apparently realistic, these

texts all conceal elements borrowed from different genres. 'Magic' is the term I have chosen to collectively define these specific tropes and narrative strategies, which overcome the boundaries of realism. The choice of 'magic' originates from the problematic issues of definition for the genres of fantasy and the fantastic, as discussed in the last section of this introductory chapter. My choice does not claim to be the groundbreaking theory of a new genre, but rather a trans-generic 'working definition'. 'Magic' seems to describe the deployment of certain tropes and narrative strategies in the analysed texts more coherently than 'fantasy' or 'fantastic', while, at the same times, it embraces the coexistence of different genres in the same text.

Even though it allows more flexibility, the designation of 'magic' has its limits and its problems. For instance, it might seem far-fetched to say that Ali Smith's collections of short stories, *Free Love* (1995) and *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999) and her first novel *Like* contain distinctive 'magic' tropes. Nonetheless, these early works are discussed because some of the structural, thematic and stylistic features in them foreshadow the magic trope of 'ghosts' running in her novel *Hotel World* (2001); similarly, although framed by historical settings, Margaret Elphinstone's *The Sea Road* (2000) and more so Sian Hayton's *Trilogy* (1989, 1992, 1993) both contain magical tropes and narrative strategies. Likewise, Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1978) and *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989), Alice Thompson's *Justine* (1996) and *Pandora's Box* (1998) and Alison Fell's *The Bad Box* (1987) and *The Mistress of Lilliput or The Pursuit* (1999) all share realistic settings, even though they are variously haunted, framed and / or interrupted by surreal, supernatural or mythical elements which can be collectively referred to as 'magic'.

The combination of different genres recurs through all the texts studied in this thesis. This mixture and the often blurred boundaries between realism and different fantasy-related genres (myth, fairy tale, gothic novel, folk tale, ballad, romance) is a challenge to the definition of genre itself. For this reason, the last section of this introduction will be a comparative critical discussion of relevant

genre definitions – including 'fantasy', the 'fantastic', 'magic realism' and 'romance' – to attempt further clarification of the definition of 'magic'.

Nationalism, nationality and other nation-bound issues are crucial for the definition and the discussion of the selected authors. To all of them, nation and nationality assume different meanings and set different boundaries. Late twentieth-century theories about the need for revision of such definitions and borders are pivotal to the analysis of these very different authors. Birthplace, up-bringing and family connections play relevant, but differing roles in the definition of nationality in the authors' experiences. As their interviews testify, the authors' biographies and views on nationality all seem to challenge stable notions of national identity, already questioned by the theoretical debate on nation at the end of the century.

As with genre and nation, similarly, gender constitutes a critical paradigm of this study. Feminist and gender issues arise from the authors' texts' in different ways and to varying degrees. Sometimes, there are strong gender claims against patriarchal society and gender categorisation – see, for example, Tennant's novels *The Bad Sister* and *The Two Women of London* and Alice Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* – but other texts present less obvious gender agendas. In some cases, gender is associated with the critique of other issues concerning modern society, such as, for instance, Elphinstone's environmental stance in *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* and *An Apple From A Tree* (1990). Moreover, across the analysed texts, time-settings vary extensively and contemporary gender issues may be transposed into a specific historical setting – Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*, Hayton's *Trilogy*, Elphinstone's *The Sea Road* – an ageless dimension – Elphinstone's *The Incomer* or *A Sparrow's Flight* – or modern times – Fell's *The Bad Box*, Hayton's *The Governors*. In other instances, gender concerns and feminist thinking do not seem to play a crucial role in the narratives, as in most of Smith's fiction, which does not allow for distinctive feminist issues to surface in her stories.

A final note of this foreword should explain the rationale behind the selection of the specific period 1978-2001. The last twenty years of the twentieth century have often been recognised as the most fertile since the Scottish Renaissance. Gradual political changes from the first referendum in 1979 to the victory of the devolution referendum in 1997 have accompanied the refreshed atmosphere of cultural awakening and a 'second' cultural Renaissance in Scotland, as Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson commented in 1993:

> It has become commonplace to observe that the past two decades have proved the most productive and challenging period in Scottish literary culture since the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed the profusion and eclecticism of creative talent across all genres and all three of the nation's languages has led some to speak not simply of revival, but of a new – perhaps even more 'real' – Scottish Renaissance.[1]

Indeed the flourishing literary production in Scotland in the last twenty years has also shown the increasing presence of women writers as well as a renewed critical interest in women's writing. As testified by a number of studies published over the last two decades of the twentieth century, what Wallace and Stevenson call 'a new Scottish Renaissance' is certainly marked by a much stronger awareness from and towards women writers.[2] In this study, the specific time-span 1978-2001 is intended to suggest continuity from the end of the second into the beginning of the third millennium. The decision to frame the time-span with the publications of Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1978) and Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) was determined by the fact that the two texts seemed to be crucial to this discussion. In 1978 Tennant's rewriting of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) sign-posted a return to the traditional supernatural and in 2001 Smith's *Hotel World* opens the traditional ghost story to postmodernist theories and interpretation.[3]

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[1] Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson, eds., *The Scottish Novel Since The Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 1.

[2] See sections two and three of this introduction.

[3] Hence the exclusion of more recent texts published by some of the authors included in this thesis: Margaret Elphinstone's *Hy Brasil* (2002), Alice Thompson's *Pharos* (2002), Alison Fell's *Tricks of the Light* (2003) and Ali Smith's *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2003).

Within the stated period, the selection of *only* six authors was the result of a necessary restriction for the nature of this research. The decision to focus the study on fiction was made because it is the form in which 'magic' is traditionally most present.[4] Even within the boundaries of fiction, there are some 'absentees'. Although their texts engage with the tropes and philosophical questions of magic, authors such as Sara Maitland, Shena MacKay and Ellen Galford were eventually omitted merely for time and word limit reasons. On the other hand, even though Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy and Muriel Spark also share common grounds with the six selected authors, one of the primary aims of the thesis is to contribute to the scholarly research in Scottish literature through the study of authors who have received less attention than Galloway, Kennedy and, pre-eminently, Spark; although Emma Tennant, Margaret Elphinstone and Alice Thompson have received some critical attention, the works of Alison Fell, Sian Hayton and Ali Smith have generally not been subjected to extensive academic investigation. *Re-Working the Magic* aims to fill in, at least partially, this gap.

[4] For this reason, dramatist and poet Liz Lochhead could not be included in the present study, despite her affinities with some of the studied authors. Likewise, it was not possible to include in the discussion Alison Fell's poetic work and children's fiction and Ali Smith's drama.

2. Re-tracing national boundaries: Six Scottish Women Writers

As the title of this section suggests, questions of nation and national identity are going to be discussed following the international debate on nation issues and focussing on their significance for Scotland and Scottish women at the end of the twentieth century. The last twenty years of the twentieth century have been marked by various insurgences of nationalism across Europe and the world, the Balkan wars, the fragmentation and fall of the former Soviet Union and the rise of nationalist political parties throughout Europe are the most visible symptoms of this trend. No full understanding of such political events can be achieved so shortly after their occurrence and neither can their long-term consequences be envisaged for the future. During the same time period the debate over nationalism and national identity has seen the publication of a number of theoretical studies on the subject. In 1979 Julia Kristeva expressed her view over the twilight of the nineteenth-century concept of nation after Second World War, with these words:

> The nation – dream and reality of the nineteenth century – seems to have reached both its apogee and its limits when the 1929 crash and the National-Socialist apocalypse demolished the pillars that, according to Marx, were its essence: economic homogeneity, historical tradition and linguistic unity. It could be demonstrated that, the Second World War, though fought in the name of national values (in the above sense of the term), brought an end to the nation as reality. [...] The chimera of economic *homogeneity* gave way to *interdependence* [...], while *historical* tradition and *linguistic* unity were recast as a broader and deeper determinant: what might be called symbolic denominator, defined as the cultural and religious memory forged by the interweaving of history and geography.[5]

The evolution of the concept of nation from a nineteenth century 'dream and reality' shaped by 'economic homogeneity', 'historical tradition' and 'linguistic unity' to a late twentieth-century post-war reality signals that enormous changes

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[5] Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time' (1979), in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 187-213 (188).

have affected the three paradigms of nation and national identity. In place of the 'old' national values, a new concept of 'nation', primarily based on economic interdependence, foreshadows the advent of economic globalisation, whereas language unity and historical tradition assume a symbolic dimension. In 1979 Kristeva's emphasis on the loss of 'homogeneity' and coherence in the twentieth-century conceptualisation of 'nation' challenged the definition of 'nation' and suggested the need for different parameters. Fifteen years later, Post-colonialist theorist Homi K. Bhabha reinforced the need to re-discuss national boundaries and the ideal of a utopian, homogeneous nation, when he argued that 'the very concept of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, 'organic' ethnic communities [...] are in a profound process of redefinition'.[6] Bhabha openly criticised Benedict Anderson's theories that national identities are shaped from mutual feelings of 'sameness' and 'belonging' to an 'imagined community': 'It is imagined because the members of even the smallest of nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.[7] Against Anderson's positivist view that behind the birth of national identity is 'the search [...] for a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together',[8] Bhabha switched the emphasis on the fluctuating, unstable and dynamic concept of boundaries at the end of the twentieth century:

> In the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement, caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà – here and there, on all sides, fort / da, hither and thither, back and forth.[9]

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[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[7] Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983) (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

[8] Benedict Anderson, p. 36.

[9] Bhabha, p.1.

Bhabha's theories on the meaning of nation and national identity shift the focus from the centre – the representative nucleus of a hegemonic culture – to the periphery – the marginal communities and minorities, whose concept of nation inevitably differs from the majority in power. As the hierarchies of the components of nation are inverted, paradoxically, and yet very aptly, the marginal becomes the central issue of a modern discussion of national identity. Furthermore, by rejecting the nineteenth-century value of 'homogeneity' as a crucial component of nation, cultural diversity and heterogeneity become a vital part for any twentieth (and twenty-first) century discussion on nation.

The focus on diversity and cultural minorities has found a response in several studies on nation and recent theories of national identity in Scotland. In an article published in 1996, Aileen Christianson also criticised Anderson's male-centred theories of nation and national identity, as she discussed the position of women within Scottish nation. Being both 'female' and 'Scottish', Christianson argues, Scottish women are inevitably relegated to the margins of the hegemonic male, English cultural milieu they operate in:

> The question for us here is whether there are particular conjunctions and disjunctions for women in marginal societies between the marginality of our femaleness and of our nation. And whether these multi-dimensional perspectives of nation, region, gender, class and sexuality are in a perpetual state of flux, with oppositions and alliances in constantly shifting relationships within ourselves and with others.[10]

Christianson envisages the possibility that the paradigms of nation and gender can and will have a double impact on those who are placed beyond the boundaries of a hegemonic culture. The question here seems to be about the effects that this double marginalisation can have on the concept of nation. If women are to be part of any given 'national' culture, their inclusion inevitably will lead to the re-tracing of certain boundaries, in order for the 'marginal' communities to be included within (rather than beyond) such boundaries. Christianson's suggestion of the need for re-definition of national cultural

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[10] Aileen Christianson, 'Imagined Corners to Debatable Land: Passable Boundaries', in *Scottish Affairs*, 17 (1996), pp. 120-134 (121).

boundaries in Scotland is very relevant to the topic of this thesis. When we look at the six authors analysed in this thesis, more complex issues of 'inclusion' arise from the diverse geography of birth, upbringing and residence. Their partial 'belonging' to England via birth, up-bringing or residence, raises more questions about nationality and marginality. Can we define this heterogeneous group of women writers as Scottish? Are 'Scottish' and 'English' antonyms? How can boundaries between the two categories be crossed? It seems manifest that the altering of conventional national boundaries is a crucial step, if English-born authors such as Margaret Elphinstone and Sian Hayton or English resident authors such as Alison Fell, Ali Smith and Emma Tennant, can be included within the boundaries of Scottish literature. In 1997 Flora Alexander attempted to solve the thorny issue of national identification, as far as Alison Fell and Emma Tennant are concerned, with the 'Anglo-Scot' formula:

> Some contemporary Scottish women writers of fiction are living in England, and in several cases they have also been educated in England so that their Scottishness may not be immediately apparent. Nevertheless [...] all of them carry with them some sense of their Scottish origins.[11]

The oxymoronic 'Anglo-Scot' classification ties the Scots to the dominant culture from which, traditionally, they have been striving to be free, independent and different. When interviewed, Tennant and Fell have both claimed their right to be included within the Scottish literary context. In particular, Tennant has emphasised the relevance of her Scottish background to her work. In her words:

> The facts are these: my family is Scottish, and I grew up a stone's throw from James Hogg's Ettrick Forest. Two of the novels in the omnibus — *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* — take their inspiration from Hogg and Stevenson (a few more stones' throw away in Edinburgh) respectively. *Wild Nights* is a novel about that Scottish childhood.[12]

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[11] Flora Alexander, 'Contemporary Fiction III: The Anglo-Scots', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 630-40 (p. 630).

[12] Emma Tennant, 'Intrinsically Scottish', *Times Literary Supplement*, August 2001, p. 15.

Tennant's passionate statement about her relationship to her Scottish ancestry reveals the fear of exclusion from a cultural group the author identifies herself with and feels attached to. Similarly, Fell feels that her Scottish identity is extremely relevant to some of her work, even though, at times nation-labels – such as the hybrid 'Anglo-Scot' – may narrow the boundaries of creativity:

> My formative years were all shaped by being exposed to all the forces and the conflicts that are in Scotland. There is no way they can ever get away from what you write because writing comes from so deep. [...] The term Anglo-Scot is completely foreign, it is really stupid [...]. This whole nation-issue verges on xenophobia. [...] The imagination knows no country. People are always looking for categories, labels. It is just a lot of nonsense.[13]

The two authors' responses to questions of national identity highlight intricate and contradictory aspects of the debate on national identity in and beyond Scotland. In particular, Fell identifies the Scottish cultural context as a place where conflicting forces are at work. Undoubtedly, the sectarian element of Scotland and the inner divisions running through the geography, the politics and the idioms of the Scottish nation can be identified as distinctive facets of the Scottish nation, while duality and ambivalence are intrinsic qualities within Scottish culture, and its historical antagonism with the English nation.

Both the Scottish inner division and the opposition against England are crucial factors, which contribute to the shaping of a Scottish national identity. Definitions of Scottish culture as the product of a split nation proudly standing against the dominant English culture, however, can be a dangerous instrument of conservative nationalism. The feelings of utopian nostalgia for a mythical independent Caledonia conceal the double-edged risks of inward parochialism and outward intolerance. As Christopher Whyte has emphasised:

> Scottish culture, we are told, was mutilated by the twin disasters of the Union of the Crowns and the Union of Parliaments, landmarks in a process of assimilation to England which increasingly diluted a pre-existing core of genuine Scottishness. [...] The dangers of such a stance are that it is committed to the restoration, not only of Scotland as it was, but of relations between genders, classes, racial groups

[13] 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

> and differing sexual orientations that would be unacceptably oppressive in a modern context. If we want to bring back a Scotland that once was, what place will there be in it for blacks or lesbians or the children of Pakistani immigrants? [14]

Whyte highlights the threat implicit within reactionary nationalistic debates about late twentieth-century Scotland. Inevitably, the consequences of such extreme conservative positions would be critical for those social groups, minorities and communities that would be left out of the new boundaries set to define a 'modern Scotland'. Crucially, Whyte links gender and nation issues, stipulating the necessity to discuss the two paradigms together in an analysis of contemporary Scottish literature. Likewise, Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden have underlined the need to rediscuss the paradigms of nation and gender jointly, in their introduction to *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (2000):

> Any work which takes as its parameters the terms 'Scottish' and 'women' must make some attempt to explain its critical paradigms. Clearly there is a sense in which both denote a degree of 'marginality', an exclusion from the dominant discourse of white male 'Britishness'.[15]

Questions of gender and nation need to be addressed in terms of re-definition of boundaries, of shifting positions between centralities and marginalities. Moreover, even within strictly national boundaries – as Christianson and Lumsden emphasise – contemporary Scotland presents itself as culturally diverse:

> Now that a greater degree of autonomy has been achieved in Scotland and what many would regard as the common political goal attained, what begins to emerge is a sense, or a reminder, of Scotland's lack of homogeneity. Within its compact national boundaries there are significant geographical and cultural differences

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[14] Christopher Whyte, ed., *Gendering The Nation. Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. xii.

[15] Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden, eds., *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 2.

> between Highland and Lowland Scotland, North-East, East and West, mainland and (diverse) islands.[16]

The diversity of Scotland is a crucial issue when trying to define Scottishness. Geographical and cultural diversity make it impossible to endorse images of stereotypical Scotland which rejoice in a glorified past and exploit the picturesque beauty of the Scottish Highlands. Scotland is not just Oban and Glencoe, it is also Glasgow and the Borders. Urban Scotland is a constantly changing context which must be included in the Scottish landscape next to the mountains and the glens. The diverse geography of the Scottish nation and the constant development of urban areas throughout the twentieth century is not the only source of fragmentation for a Scottish iconography. Other elements, such as the input of ethnic and religious minorities, the increasingly prominent positions occupied by women at all levels and the acknowledgement of different sexual orientations are all factors which equally challenge the traditional, nostalgic and perhaps fictional concept of Scottishness. In fact, rather than heading towards a stable and static model of integration, the ever-changing layers of Scottish society are constantly transforming and altering the precarious balance of a growing nation.

The extreme diversification of Scottish culture in the last few decades of the twentieth century is further proved by an overview of the literary production of the last twenty years. From the 1980s onward Scottish literary production has revealed different trends in the fertile territory of a heterogeneous land. The works of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, through the use of realism and the grotesque have manifested the darkest character of an anti-kailyard urban Scotland. In their works, which focus on recognisable class groups or social communities, Scotland is viewed and portrayed as a defined political and social environment. Beside realism, a return to magic has been highlighted as perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the literary production of the last twenty

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[16] Chrstianson and Lumsden, p. 3. See also Christie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 1-9.

years of the Millennium.[17] Wallace and Stevenson draw attention to 1981 as a crucial date: 'The considerable impact of this bold enlargement of Scottish creative potential remains symbolised by the publication in 1981 of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*. [...] Here was an epic, formally adventurous, thematically profound novel synthesising realism and fantasy'.[18] The re-born fascination with non-realistic fiction has been perhaps one of the most important aspects of what has been described as the 'new Scottish Renaissance'.[19]

The prominence of women writers in Scotland has also been a significant feature in the literary scene of the last two decades of the twentieth century. The last twenty years of the twentieth century have seen the flourishing production of more creative works from women writers. During the same time period, the increasing interest in women's writing has also been testified by the republication of work by previously neglected women writers, and by a number of critical studies undertaken to reveal the forgotten female tradition in Scotland.[20] The development of gender studies in Scotland is further proof of the renewed Scottish literary scene. In an article included in *Tea and Leg Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland* (1992), Dorothy McMillan investigates the progressive movement towards self-determination running throughout the female tradition in Scotland, from Lady Grisell Baillie to Willa Muir.[21] Caroline Gonda's introduction to the anthology significantly assimilates this feminist desire for self-determination identified within Scottish women's literary tradition to the political emancipation of Scotland in literary criticism:

> Having battled our way into the institutions, though, we must take care not to get locked into institutional thinking. This includes resisting those developments within the academy which exclude feminists outside it.
>
> This double perspective of locking out and locking in is especially useful and appropriate for a volume coming out of Scotland. Scotland

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[17] See Douglas Gifford, 'Imagining Scotlands: The Return to Mythology in Modern Scottish Fiction', in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Susanne Hageman (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 1996), pp. 17-49.

[18] Wallace and Stevenson, p. 3.

[19] See Wallace and Stevenson.

[20] See Anderson and Christianson, Introduction.

[21] See Dorothy McMillan, 'Heroines and Writers', in *Tea and Leg Irons. New Feminist Readings From Scotland*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992), pp. 17-30.

> has long been both locked into and locked out of the English political and economic systems, its resources swallowed up without acknowledgement. This process extends to Scottish culture, too. [...] Scottishness becomes invisible when it suits English readers.[22]

More recently, critical anthologies such as Christopher Whyte's *Gendering the Nation* (1995), Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan's *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997), Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson's *Scottish Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1960s* (2000) and Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden's *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (2000) arise from the need to fill in the gaps left empty by the primarily male-oriented criticism in Scotland. The critical angle of the four studies emphasises the relevance of gender and nation as joint key aspects of their analyses of twentieth-century Scottish literature. The issues of nation and gender reveal the need for a more open attitude towards borders and the danger concealed in academic pigeon-holing. Introducing Caroline Gonda's article 'An Other Country? Mapping Scottish/Lesbian writing' Whyte remarks: 'Labels can be a source of both empowerment and restriction'.[23] Indeed behind the studies collected in *Gendering the Nation* is the notion that the literary map of Scotland needs to be re-traced, adding new / old routes to the well trodden trails of the literary canon. The traditionally accepted concepts of nation and the protective national boundaries begin to crumble under the centrifugal pressures of these new inclusions.

The radical need for a more open attitude is vital to appreciate the diversity among contemporary Scottish women writers. Such diversity reflects the social, geographical and sexual shifting of the nation that these writers feel they belong to. Nostalgia for an invented past made of happiness and 'true Scottish values' has often been the focus of debate especially among contemporary women writers. The fear of change and the comforting shelter of past memories are feelings that A. L Kennedy puts in the thoughts of Jennifer, the main character and narrator of *So I Am Glad* (1995): 'As far as I can

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[22] Gonda 1992, p. 7.
[23] Whyte 1995, p. xvii.

understand, my entire country spent generations immersed in more and more passionate versions of its own past, balancing its preoccupations with less and less organised activity or even interest in the here and now'.[24] Jennifer's critique of the state of affairs in Scotland reflects A.L. Kennedy's own rejection of Scottish nostalgia. In other occasions, Kennedy has often manifested a passionate rejection of national paradigms to define her work and literature in general.[25] Her voice is not the only one challenging the idea that nationality is a relevant form of definition when discussing literature. Invernesian Ali Smith, who currently lives in Cambridge, has repeatedly asserted the right for her imagination to be free from nostalgic nationalism or any constricting boundaries. In an interview conducted in 1997, Smith expressed her feelings towards Scotland in these words: 'I'm a Scottish writer no matter what [...]. Even if I live in Greece [...] your imagination does not have a homeland. [...] I have no pressure on me at all to write but I think it must be quite different for writers up here, surrounded by all the hype of "how Scottish we all are"'.[26] Even more recently, Smith's comments disclose her discomfort towards a rigid application of national boundaries to the criticism of her work. The implication is that nationality is only one aspect of an author's personality, but when it is seen as the predominant one, it becomes difficult to establish what else is relevant when discussing an author's work. In the attempt to escape the danger of attaching any single label to her work, she challenges the values of the different ways in which she can be described: 'I don't find labels at all helpful. Where do you start and where do you stop? Scottish, lesbian, right-handed, Catholic, Invernesian... everything is relevant and none of them is more relevant than the other, not really'.[27] Smith's emphasis is on the relativity of national (and other) labels suggests the centrality of creative imagination and its flexible boundaries with other contexts. In a recent interview, Elphinstone – who was born in England,

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[24] A. L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 187.

[25] See A. L. Kennedy, 'Not changing the world', in *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Ian A. Bell (Cardiff: University of Cardiff Press, 1995), pp.100-102.

[26] Ann Donald, 'Like for Like', *The List*, 11-24 July 1997, p. 74.

[27] Caroline Gonda, 'An Other Country? Mapping Scottish/Lesbian/Writing' in Whyte 1995, pp. 1-24 (p. 5).

but has spent most of her adult life in Scotland – suggests a similar degree of care when defining nationality:

> I am dealing with nationality. I think that it should not be limiting. As soon as you define it, you limit it; all such definitions are reactionary, so I think you always have to say the boundaries are blurry and always fluid. [...] I have met with the question: 'how can you be a Scottish writer and you haven't got a Scottish accent?' I have never tried to become a Scottish woman writer, I am just me. Birth, setting, language are all clues to national identity in lots of narratives. That is fine. I just get wary of it when it becomes exclusive or rigid, because, per se, you are shutting people out and that could lead down the road of racism or fascism.[28]

Elphinstone's and Smith's reverse geographical paths emphasise the need of flexibility when dealing with nationality and literature today. The other authors discussed in this thesis vary in their opinions concerning national boundaries and identity. As seen above, Tennant has strongly defended her Scottish ancestry on various occasions,[29] and Fell has recognised the importance of her inclusion in the Scottish literary scene, even though she feels that labels are at times too reactionary and might narrow the scope of an author's imagination. Alice Thompson suggests the necessity of a more open attitude towards national boundaries, in favour of a less parochial enclosure of the literary context in Scotland:

> I am undoubtedly influenced by my Scottishness in myriad ways, but there are other just as powerful influences on my writing; the main one being other writers whose nationality is various. Nationhood is relevant to literature – and to some writers more than others – but it is always in the context of the plurality of life. That is the strength of good literature: its complexity and resistance to parochialism. [30]

Against parochialism, Thompson reinforces the need for flexible, inclusive boundaries, when discussing the undeniable influence of Scottish culture over her writing. Similarly, Sian Hayton, whose background includes Scottish, Welsh,

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[28] 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone'. See appendix to the thesis.

[29] See John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 281-304 and Emma Tennant, 'Intrinsically Scottish', *Times Literary Supplement*, August 2001, p. 15.

[30] 'Interview with Alice Thompson'. See appendix to the thesis.

English and Jewish roots, makes claims for tolerance and a wider perspective on nationality and national identity:

> I think I'm European, or North British, if you want to narrow it to a smaller geographical area. In the last book of the *Trilogy* I'm trying to make this point all the way through, because even as early as the tenth century, Europe was on the move, and people were changing countries and changing nationalities, swapping cultural backgrounds. It's just absurd to talk about nation as a fixed concept. It's been growing in the last three hundred years. If you'd to go back to eighth century Britain, and you were to say 'this is England', people would say 'no', because there would have been Scandinavians coming in, Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Northern Vikings...[31]

Hayton's views on nationality reflect on the notion that national boundaries have been and will always be shifting. To consider any boundary as a fixed entity would be to deny the course of history and the universal desire to overcome such boundaries, professed by human history itself. Against such static fallacies, Hayton's texts search for a more open attitude towards borders of nationality, gender, sexual orientation and belief. The authors' opinions presented above highlight the intensely felt attitudes that each author holds towards their Scottish identity and the need for flexibility when discussing the issue of national boundaries. The problematic discussion on Scottishness and nationality leads to the question of what makes these authors Scottish apart from birth, ancestry and residence, and whether their texts reveal other distinctively Scottish characteristics. Perhaps there is no single answer to these questions. However, there are challenges to be made and new ways of approaching Scottishness from the points of view of these six Scottish authors of the late twentieth century, and a revised relationship to 'tradition' and 'traditional boundaries' may help to define progressively the literary context to which these texts refer and belong.

I started this section with Julia Kristeva's and Homi K. Bhabha's theories on the redefinition of nation and national identity. A corollary to the re-discussion of the concept of nationality is a re-shaping of the relationship between nation and tradition. If 'nation' is no longer viewed as a cohesive,

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[31] 'Interview with Sian Hayton', Appendix.

homogeneous, united cultural group, what role is played by national tradition? If 'nation' is no longer represented by a central majority, but a growing community spread across a number of diverse, marginal, centrifugal communities, is there such a thing as a unique national tradition? Along with 'nation', Bhabha emphasises, a shift is necessary in a conceptual redefinition of 'tradition':

> The right to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'. The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition. The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.[32]

In Bhabha's view, tradition ceases to signify merely the cultural monopoly of 'authorized power', the unilateral expression of a hegemonic culture imposed over a larger, heterogeneous cultural group. In fact, the cultural expressions of marginal minorities are identified as the contradictory differentiations and the centrifugal forces, which struggle to be contained in a monolithic tradition. In the Scottish context, Bhabha's paradigm of diversification of tradition well fits the extremely heterogeneous Scottish literary tradition. In Scotland, tradition originates from a dialogue of opposing voices – as Cairns Craig emphasises – an unsolved conflict among struggling forces:

> Traditions emerge through debate and dialogue and constitute the site of ongoing debates which have certain premises and certain limits. They can be negated only by establishing new premises and new limits, and the very act of negation becomes itself a part of the tradition to which later participants in the debate have to accede as one of the elements of their own condition. Traditions are not the unitary voice of an organic whole but the dialectic engagement between opposing value systems which define each other precisely by their intertwined oppositions.[33]

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[32] Bhabha, p. 2.

[33] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and The National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 32-33.

Craig's definition of tradition moves away from any notion of homogeneity, towards the plurality of traditions, made of uneven facets, dissonant voices and clashing nuances. Traditions must be viewed in their diversity and incongruence. More importantly, traditions have to be looked at as constantly changing bodies, evolving and transforming themselves indefinitely. Only through this organically dynamic interpretation of tradition, can the problems of defining contemporary Scotland be overcome. If it is accepted that tradition is not a static corpus but an organic body, then it is perhaps safer to discuss the fluctuating borders of nation and gender without the risk of parochialism and ghettoisation.

The texts studied in this thesis show flexible bonds with Scottish and non-Scottish traditions. The influence of other texts originating from a variety of national cultures is integrated in the primarily Scottish cultural environment to which the six authors belong in different ways. This coexistence of different sources into the studied texts can be understood as the result of what Craig calls 'dialectic engagement'. The interaction between opposed forces, the harmony made of dissonances, the polyphony of voices that build a discourse, is the starting point for more open and dynamic definitions of nation and tradition. Reflecting the authors' openness towards the concepts of nation and national identity, their texts indicate a fusion of influences, which establish a polyvalent bond with Scottish culture, as their ramifications towards other cultural referents do not weaken their link to the specific cultural community, but indeed enhance the relation between that and other cultures.

The coalescence of Scottish and non-Scottish traditions in the analysed texts takes various forms and occurs in different degrees. Some of the texts establish an open relationship with identifiable elements of a Scottish tradition, while others create subtler links. Elphinstone's texts draw on several elements from the Scottish ballad and folk tradition. Her collection of short stories *An Apple from a tree* and early novels *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* are particularly rich with imagery and themes borrowed from traditional ballads such as 'Tam Lin' and 'Thomas the Rhymer'. Likewise, even though *The Sea Road*

does not deal with a specifically Scottish tradition, the Icelandic sagas referred to in the novel, are related to the author's experiences in Shetland,[34] namely the crossing point of the Scandinavian and Celtic worlds. In Elphinstone's fiction traditional texts belonging to different cultural groups are merged to create new texts that effectively operate a cross-national fusion of boundaries. In fact, national boundaries are not always relevant, as Elphinstone admits, 'a book by a Scottish writer does not have to be about Scotland'.[35] The direct influence of Celtic folk tradition is also evident in Sian Hayton's *Trilogy* and *The Governors*. Traditional Celtic folk tales – such as 'The Battle of the Birds' – and episodes borrowed from the Arthurian cycle – for example, 'Culwuch and Olwen' – occupy a central position in the creation of the giant's world in the *Trilogy*. Even in *The Governors* traditional Scottish folklore penetrates a narrative set in the late twentieth century: selkie-lore and other Scottish superstitions intrude the apparently realistic narrative to create a web of 'magic' sub-plots. Significantly, Hayton connects the influence of Celtic traditions in her writing to her own up-bringing, her being a 'Scot in exile', and family story-telling:

> We used to have family gatherings every Saturday night and that was when the Celtic thing would come out because the Scots in exile are... worse than the Scots at home! So, we heard the stories out... I heard them many times. [...] So I used to spend the evenings curled up in the settee, listening to them singing and telling stories, hoping that they wouldn't notice me and send me up to bed. It was kind of 'Celtic Twilighty' and there was lots of whisky going around, too.
> [...] To write about Scottish Celtic culture, it's not something that you do self-consciously. It's either joined to you or, otherwise it's always going to be a transplant, it's always going to be obvious and you're always going to look at that to make sure it's there. But if you keep pulling a plant up to look at its roots, it will die.[36]

Hayton reinforced the idea that cultural influences operate on a writer's imagination sub-consciously. Establishing connections and building bridges between opposing cultures, such as being brought up in England listening to Celtic folk tales, is a further representation of the dynamic quality of tradition.

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[34] See 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.
[35] 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.
[36] 'Interview with Sian Hayton', Appendix.

Tennant's interest in authors and texts from the Scottish canon and the Scottish landscape has already been highlighted towards the beginning of this section. More specifically, Tennant's choice of rewriting Hogg's and Stevenson's texts also suggests the author's fascination with ideas and themes derived from the Scottish doppelgänger: physical fragmentation, psychological dissociation, physical distortion and mental derangement. From her reading of the previous Scottish texts, Tennant's narratives pay a tribute to Hogg's and Stevenson's stories of dissociation, while reshaping their texts to follow her feminist agenda.

Whereas Elphinstone, Hayton and Tennant all establish overtly direct relationships with various aspects of Scottish ballad, folk tradition and literature, the other authors' ties to Scottish traditions are not always so manifest. Alice Thompson, Alison Fell and Ali Smith establish a more understated relationship with their Scottish background. Fell's novels present a mixture of influences, of Scottish and non-Scottish settings, themes and traditions. *The Bad Box* noticeably draws from the author's autobiographical experiences of Scotland, her traumatic moving from the Highlands and experience of Scottish sectarianism as a youth. Beside the biographical element, Fell's readings of traditional folk tales such as 'The Weaver's Son' constitute the strongest influence in the secondary narrative of the novel, the Hind girl's plot.[37] *The Mistress of Lilliput*, on the other hand, does not feature a manifest Scottish theme. Nonetheless, Fell's pastiche based on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is narrated from the point of view of a Scottish Mrs Gulliver. The switch in the point of view creates a Scottish link as the narrative explores the evolution of Mrs Gulliver from her Scottish Presbyterian up-bringing to her new awareness and existence.

Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* are inspired by Sade's *Justine* and *Juliet* and the Greek myth of Pandora respectively. The fact that the literary and mythological models are derived from very different cultures and eras is secondary to Thompson's intention that is shared in both novels, the challenge

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[37] 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

of gender roles and rational thinking. Both *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* question preconceptions, social conventions and gender roles. Though very different from Tennant's rewriting of the classic Scottish novels, Justine' story of dissociation and Pandora's tale of physical metamorphosis are re-enactments of Hogg's Wringhim and Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, perpetuating the human questioning of rational certainties, narrative reliability, psychological and physical stability.

Perhaps more difficult to pin down to any canon is Ali Smith's fiction. Though her first novel, *Like*, is partly set in Scotland, settings do not generally help to assess Smith's relationship with her Scottish background. Unlike the other authors included in this thesis, her use of intertextuality and parody is understated. Nonetheless, a close analysis of Smith's texts reveals a closeness to some Scottish motifs. The concept of liminality is central throughout her fiction, and can take different nuances: it is the recurring theme of absence, the existence between boundaries, the paradoxical world between life and death, a ghost-haunted hotel. Although Smith's fiction apparently makes no claims of a distinctively Scottish legacy, her fascination with liminality associates her with a specific Scottish preoccupation with paradox and human existence, which stretches from nineteenth century supernatural ghost stories to postmodernist works by Alasdair Gray and Muriel Spark.

I started this section drawing attention on the international debate over nation and nationality in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Kristeva's and Bhabha's theories on the heterogeneity of the modern nation have had a strong impact on the scholarship about Scottish national identity. In particular, Bhabha's accent on 'marginal communities' was received by Whyte, Christianson and Lumsden who have stressed the importance of gender in this new conceptualisation of nation. The need for revised borders of a Scottish culture comprehensive of all minorities and marginal communities has been stressed as an essential starting point for any discussion on nation and national identity in Scotland. As far as this thesis is concerned, the heterogeneous

nature of the bonds which link the six authors to the Scottish nation raises questions of definition of Scottishness and inclusion, as it seems clear that political and traditional national boundaries often clash with feelings of belonging bred in an author's imagination.

Bhabha's and Craig's theories about the plurality of voices speaking in a traditional context and the dynamic forces which shape traditions help opening the national boundaries of Scottish literature to the marginalised peripheries of women's and queer writing and the acknowledgement of ethnic cultures. In view of a more open notion of Scottish heterogeneity and having accepted the concept of the dynamic and dialectic forces operating within the plurality of traditions, the inclusion of the six selected authors within the boundaries of Scottish literature should seem appropriate. The Scottish legacy manifests itself in their texts in very different ways and yet they share common ground which can be called Scottish. Specifically Scottish tropes and references are identified in the making of these texts. This is why the title of this thesis is *Re-Working the Magic*: rather than being a completely new concept, magic is re-created through the use of different tools borrowed from tradition. Traditional material such as Celtic folk tales, Scottish ballads and Scandinavian sagas are adopted to recreate either historical narratives – Hayton's *Trilogy*, Elphinstone's *The Sea Road* – to add a surreal angle to contemporary narratives – Fell's *The Bad Box*, Hayton's *The Governors* – or establish a link between past and future worlds – Elphinstone's *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*. Likewise, distinctive Scottish literary references to tales of the double and human metamorphosis are found in Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* and Tennant's *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London*. Similarly, Smith's interest in liminality plays with traditional ghost-lore and explores the philosophical question of the unknown in the majority of her short stories and especially in her novel *Hotel World*.

The influence of different aspects of the Scottish cultural and literary traditions on the six authors shows how Scottishness can manifest itself in a variety of ways and levels in the creative process of writing. Gender, the second

paradigm of this study, is the focus of the next section, which focuses on the interaction between women's writing and genre.

3. Gendering the Magic: Women Enchanting Texts

In the previous section, the discussion on gender and nation has lead to the recognition that national boundaries and notions of national identity need to be redefined at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The emphasis on the heterogeneity of modern nations, the centrality of marginal communities – determined by gender, race, sexual orientation or class – and the dynamics of dialectic traditions, suggests that modern national boundaries must be retraced in the light of an ever-changing Scottish tradition. The other parameter of this thesis – genre – also requires a discussion in conjunction with the other two – gender and nation. This section will look at the questions of gender and genre from a general critical perspective, while the next one will examine the philosophical significance of 'magic' in the examined texts.

The last twenty years of the millennium were undoubtedly crucial with regard to the debates on women's writing in and outside Scotland. Though feminism developed in the first half of the twentieth century, a new trend of feminist thinking has run through female cultural contexts in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, as Flora Alexander has noted:

> The 70s and 80s have been distinguished by what has come to be known as the 'second wave' of feminism. Feminism has become a highly important issue in contemporary thought, and male-devised orthodoxies about women's nature, capacities and roles have been challenged.[38]

The interests and objectives of the second wave of feminist thinking inevitably differ from the aims and needs of the movement at the beginning of the century. Throughout the last thirty years of the twentieth century, one of the prominent objectives of gender studies has been the attempt to define if and in what ways women's writing differs from men's writing. Whereas in the first half of the

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[38] Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p.2.

twentieth century, the first wave of feminism attempted to find equal grounds between man and woman, the last wave of feminist criticism switched to the need to concentrate on gender difference and on its manifestations. Transposed to literary criticism, this 'new' feminist focus was translated into a specific effort to unveil elements of 'difference' in women's writing, as summarised by Elizabeth Abel in *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1980):

> Feminist critical attention has shifted from recovering a lost tradition to discovering the terms of confrontation with the dominant tradition. Aware that women writers inevitably engage a literary history and system of conventions shaped primarily by men, feminist critics now often strive to elucidate the acts of revision, appropriation and subversion that constitute a female text. The analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition translates sexual difference into literary differences of genre, structure, voice and plot. [39]

Abel's stress on the need to investigate the strategies employed in women's texts in order to 'subvert' and repossess a primarily male-dominated tradition introduces the complex issue of the relationship between female and male writing. In the same spirit, Elaine Showalter coined the expression 'gynocritics' to underline a change in direction in feminist criticism: rather than focussing on the male tradition (androcentric perspective), in the last two decades of the twentieth century, feminism strove to reveal the ways in which female texts have their defined structures and ideologies:

> To see women's writing as our primary forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of the theoretical problem in front of us. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference. How can we constitute women as a distinct literary group? What is *the difference* of women's writing?[40]

Both Abel and Showalter underline the deep changes undergone by feminist thinking in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, in terms of a radically new perspective into gender studies. The desire to explore 'difference' in female

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[39] Elizabeth Abel, *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1980) (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 1-2.

[40] Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in *Writing and Sexual Difference* (1980), ed. by Elizabeth Abel (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 9-35 (15).

writing reveals the will of a progressing movement towards self-awareness in feminist thinking and criticism. Simultaneously, the notion of difference has been critically employed by queer theorists such as Judith Butler, who has disputed that the foundations of feminist thinking have been erroneously relying on the categorisation of identities and a binary gender opposition directly inherited from a patriarchal, Aristotelian logic. Instead, Butler has argued for the need to acknowledge the concept of difference *within* feminist thinking and against theories of gender identifying categories:

> I would argue that any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance*, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that 'identity' as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such exclusionary. This is not to say that the term "women" ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if feminism presupposes that "women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalised or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.[41]

Butler's theories about the need for a re-interpretation of the signifier 'women' as a crucible for diversity implicates that the notion of difference adopted by feminist thinkers must be applied within gender and not to merely signify binary opposition between male and female. The risk implied in an otherwise simplistic definition of "women" is inevitably the exclusion of those groups of women who do not fit in the standardised category suggested by 'mainstream' feminism. As seen previously in Bhabha's theory of nation, the concepts of heterogeneity and marginality assume prominent relevance also in gender discourse. The *fin de siècle* feminist thinking takes a step forward and puts the 'marginal' into the centre of critical investigation. This urge for repossession of centrality, passionately invoked already in 1975 by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément

[41] Judith Butler, 'Contingent foundations: Feminism and the question of 'Postmodernism', in *Feminist Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-21 (15-16).

in their joint study significantly entitled *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), was concisely expressed by Sandra G. Gilbert in her introduction to their study:

> Now [...] we can meet the "newly born woman" – the ancient / innocent / fluent / powerful / impossible woman – as she is [...]. Everything about her [...] is intense, indeed hyperbolic. She is born of Flaubert and Baudelaire, of Rimbaud and Apollinaire, as well as [...] of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, Freud, Gênet, Kleist, Hoffman, Shakespeare, and Aeschilus. Yet is she not in some sense the final figure of our own daydreams and nightmares (or even, in fact, our nightmères)? Is she not the one who erupts at, and disrupts, the edge of female consciousness, the liminal zone between sleeping and waking?[42]

It is symptomatic that in order to define the 'newly born woman' feminist criticism must make references to an international and interdisciplinary 'male' tradition of authors, thinkers and scientists who have characterised, theorised and analysed women for centuries. Cixous and Clément clearly realise that it is impossible to think about 'woman' without making comparison with 'men' and men's views of women. Even the new concept of 'woman' needs to start with a revision of the old, male-shaped concept of 'woman'. It is only through a process of repossession and revision of patriarchal references, that a new concept can take shape. But the crucial point is that the 'newly born woman' escapes all previous characterisations, theories and analyses, to reveal the ineffable, mysterious, unintelligible 'Other', neglected by the hegemonic male culture. The 'newly born woman' performs a subversive role, because she is 'the one who erupts and disrupts' and who inhabits 'the liminal zone between sleeping and waking'. Although her roots feed from the male tradition, the new creature's prime function is to deconstruct previous myths, preconceptions and fables and subverts all fictional, scientific and mythological strongholds about women.

Questions may arise from the expressed call for the repossession of an otherwise male-dominated cultural space. Rewriting the male tradition has been one of the problematic issues of the literary discourse throughout the last three

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[42] Sandra G. Gilbert, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. x.

decades of women's writing. In 2001, more than twenty years after the publication of *The Newly Born Woman*, in a study on the use of myth and fairy tale in contemporary women's writing, Susan Sellers still poses a question on the impossible relationship between women writers and the patriarchal myths of the past: 'If woman only exists within the current order as the negative of man, how might it be possible for women to rewrite myths that have scripted their demise?'[43] Sellers investigates such possibilities of women's rewriting myth and fairy tale in the second half of the twentieth century. Her analysis of authors as diverse as Angela Carter, Fay Weldon, Emma Tennant and Alice Thompson points out to a shared agenda in the female reinterpretations of 'male' myth and fairy tale. Though pursuing different objectives and adopting different styles, all writers appear to embark on a common mission: to subvert the order established by patriarchal myth and to reverse roles imposed by traditional fairy tales.

As a new story is created, several questions arise about the essence of gender and women's identities and roles. Indeed, another increasing concern in *fin de siècle* women's writing is the transgression of traditional roles and escape from customs imposed on each gender by patriarchal society. In this context, the attempt to subvert roles and customs often takes place through the adoption of alternative perspectives, which can overturn social hierarchies and invert the power lines set up by patriarchal institutions. As already suggested by Cixous and Clément, the 'newly born woman' is associated with the realm of 'nightmares', of surreal distortions of what is perceived to be 'real'. The dissident function implicit in the French critics' definition is reflected by the genre women writers have often chosen to rewrite 'man-made' fairy tales and patriarchal myths: fantasy.

Non-realistic genres invite a critical revision of social order, gender roles and political systems. Fantasy, intended in the broadest sense and not as a specific genre, allows for the world, as we know it, and its logic, as we

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[43] Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 24.

understand it, to be distorted. Oblivious to rational certainties and defiant of social conventions, fantasy texts challenge political, social and ontological preconceptions. Fantasy exposes the weaknesses and contradictions of the known world as psychological consistency of characters is progressively lost, and irrational disintegration is the primary feature of the narrative world. Rosemary Jackson summarises thus:

> Fantastic texts that try to negate or dissolve dominant signifying practices, especially 'character' representation, become from this perspective, radically disturbing. Their partial and dismembered selves break a 'realistic' signifying practice which represents the ego as an indivisible unity.[44]

Jackson's words highlight the subversive nature of fantasy, and more specifically the fantastic, as a genre which inevitably encrypts radical political messages about the 'real' world.[45] The power of effective fantasy texts, according to Jackson, belies in the coded ideologies embedded in non-realistic texts. By overcoming boundaries of a strict realism, fantasies can explore and throw light on the irrational, mysterious, inexplicable aspects of the 'real' world. Simultaneously, fantasy texts often destabilise social order and conventions, envisaging a society where 'traditionally' accepted hierarchies are subverted.

Although Jackson's theory about the subversive function of fantasy does not focus on its relationship with gender, her critical definition of fantasy suits a discourse on gender and genre. The subversive core of fantasy texts may well be one of the reasons behind genre choices in women's writing. Mary Eagleton summarises succinctly the essence of feminist criticism about the relationship between gender and the choice of non-realistic genres:

> What some critics find more subversive is feminism's questioning of realist forms of writing. To query the truth, coherence and resolution of realism is to undermine the symbolic order. Non-realist forms

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[44] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 90. Further references to this edition are given after quotation in the text.

[45] For a critical discussion on the definitions of 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic', see section 7 of this introduction.

> permit the woman writer to express the contradictions, fantasies or desires that the demands of realism silence.[46]

Throughout the texts analysed in this thesis, magic, as the prime vehicle of non-realist tensions, is a subversive power. The intrusion of magic in the narratives follows a questioning path which investigates human existence, belief and society in turn. Within the critical process triggered by the occurrence of magical episodes or by the performance of magical characters, in the specific instance, gender represents *one* of the critical angles explored by the narratives, and some of the texts are more 'engendered' than others. The choice of genre, in other words, does not always seem to originate from a gender concern. A more visible gender agenda pervades Elphinstone's earlier fiction, Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*, Hayton's *Trilogy*, Tennant's *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* and Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*. All represent a strong commitment to gender issues, sometimes articulating definite feminist positions – eminently in Tennant's work – and, at times, a challenge to gender theories – especially in Thompson's *Pandora's Box*. Elphinstone's later works, and, generally, Fell's and Smith's narratives, on the other hand, establish a more subtle discourse with gender issues, which are often subordinate to other elements of their narrative methods. Although the interaction between gender and genre is extremely relevant to some of the texts, this study does not primarily focus on gender, but on the narrative strategies and tropes employed by the six women writers. The common denominator among these very different authors is not always dictated by gender, but by the way in which magic operates in their texts. The central topic of this thesis is the primary function of magic, the challenging of ontological, epistemological and political – including gender – boundaries. Bearing in mind Jackson's theory on the subversive function of fantasy, and its general links to the problematic of gender, section four will concentrates on the various meanings and representations of (gendered) magic in the given texts.

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[46] Mary Eagleton, 'Genre and Gender', in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), pp. 250-262 (253).

4. The Subversive Philosophy of Magic: Meanings and Representations

Endowed with semantic polyvalence, magic, in the broadest sense, incorporates all that cannot be rationally explained.[47] Magic may be a synonym for power: for example, it allows Usbathaden's daughters to be reborn time and again until the giant's death in Hayton's *Trilogy*; magic incarnates metamorphosis: it makes hideous Mrs Hyde turn herself into charming Eliza Jekyll in Tennant's *Two Women of London*; magic is mystery: Sarah's ghostly existence in Smith's *Hotel World* exemplifies the enigmatic essence of magic. As a supernatural power, an impossible transformation, or an irrational belief, magic simultaneously articulates the admission of the uncanny within human existence, and embodies the mysterious force that subverts the order of the narrative world. In the selected texts, the subversive power of magic is enhanced by the fact that it originates, takes place and has consequences in a recognisable, human world. Set in medieval Scotland (Sian Hayton's *Trilogy*), late twentieth-century Britain (Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* or *Two Women of London*), or undefined future eras (Margaret Elphinstone's *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*), the force of magic coexists with the 'reality' of those worlds. Boundaries between what is 'real' and what is 'magic' are not fixed, as magic is never transcendent. This fluidity of boundaries is what gives the texts a subversive twist. Jackson highlights this feature in a comparison between 'fantastic' and 'marvellous' texts. While in the 'fantastic' there are no clear boundaries between the seen and the unseen, broadly speaking the 'marvellous' always presupposes the existence of different worlds and / or laws which go beyond those of nature:

> Fantasies moving towards the realm of the 'marvellous' are the ones which have been tolerated and widely disseminated socially. A creation of secondary worlds through religious myth, faery, science

[47] For a more detailed analysis of the term 'magic', its definition and use in this thesis, see section 7 of this introduction.

> fiction, uses 'legalized' otherworlds, worlds which are *compensatory*, which fill up a lack, making up for an apprehension of actuality as disordered and insufficient. These fantasies *transcend* that actuality. (pp.173-74).

In the texts under examination, magic is always an ambiguously immanent force. The presence of magic in the real world questions the very existence of boundaries, and yet, as Lucie Armitt emphasises, 'boundaries, borders and thresholds are always key concepts for any reading of the fantastic, linking together concepts of nation and the otherworldly, bodies and the grotesque, housing and hauntings'.[48] Magic blurs the boundaries between the realms of the unseen and the seen. Far from being unproblematic, the experience of inexplicable events within the boundaries of realistic worlds inevitably exposes the weaknesses, frictions and tensions of what is acknowledged as the 'real' world. Magic works as a catalyst, triggering the action of characters, or being a strong part of it, while, simultaneously, challenging the boundaries between what is rationally acceptable and what remains an unsolved mystery. In Hayton's *Trilogy*, although the giant's world is a feature of the 'marvellous', its supernatural aspect is not simply acknowledged as a feature of the actual world. In fact, its acceptance proves to be extremely problematic to the Christian monks and the warriors who interact with the giant's daughters. Despite their gradual movement towards tolerance and acceptance of the giant and his legacy, to the monks, the giant's world still constitutes an unutterable enigma (and a threat) at the end of the *Trilogy*.

Similarly, Elphinstone's early novels, *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, cannot be dismissed as purely 'marvellous' texts, though at times they have been categorised as belonging to the 'marvellous' sub-genre of science fiction.[49] The key factor is the characters' attitude towards the magic and the mystery of the world they inhabit. As in Hayton's novels, it is clear that characters struggle to understand the inexplicable events that take place in their

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[48] Lucie Armitt, *Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Fantastic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 1.

[49] See Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature. A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), p.215.

world, and their unwillingness and inability to accept the inexplicable stresses the discrepancies between what can be explained rationally and what remains a mystery.

A sense of mystery and the inability to understand are common motifs in Smith's and Thompson's texts. Their apparently 'realistic' narratives are always set in realistic contexts where uncanny events disturb characters' (and readers') rational beliefs, destabilising the logic of their worlds. The most manifest example of Smith's adoption of 'magic' in her writing is her use of a 'ghost' narrator in *Hotel World*, a narrative choice that carries thematic and theoretical significances. At a thematic level, the ghost narrator reflects the author's fascination with the sinister mystery of absence, death and afterlife, running through her first novel *Like* and her two collections of short stories. However, deeper meanings are suggested by Smith's employment of the ghost's voice in *Hotel World*, as by using a ghost's point of view, Smith also exploits the possibility of narrating the story from an 'impossible' point of view, which articulates metaphysical and epistemological preoccupations with the 'real' world.

Perhaps more than any other author included in this thesis, Thompson's narratives focus on the subversive power of mystery, exemplified through her fascination with the magical trope of the 'double' in her rewriting of Sade's novels *Justine* and *Juliet*. Thompson's *Justine* maintains the tension between different interpretations, a typical feature of doppelgänger narratives such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner* (1824). Similarly, in *Pandora's Box*, the mystery about Pandora's origin remains unveiled until the end of the novel. Several enigmatic episodes surround Pandora with mystery and slowly destroy any rational certainty about her existence. Although it is accepted that Noah can perform a miraculous restoration on Pandora's body, the events that follow leave characters and readers equally unable to discern the truth and distinguish between dream and reality.

At times, magic assumes oneiric contours. Surrealism often distorts Fell's realistic narratives. In *The Bad Box*, the realistic account of Isla's life is interrupted by visions from an apparently parallel supernatural story. The relationship between the two plots is never explained, while the mysterious connection between the two main characters establishes an unexplained link between the realistic and the magical plot. Similarly, when rewriting Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Lemuel Gulliver's point of view is replaced by the surreal perspective of Mary Gulliver's doll, Lady Mary, who accompanies her mistress on a quest to bring back Lemuel Gulliver from the South Seas. The doll's narrative imposes a suspension of disbelief and adds a surreal twist to the story, which thus moves away from Swift's political satire. Nonetheless, political hierarchies of different kinds, those of man and woman, are subverted by the doll's narrative that inverts the centrality of their points of view and, ultimately, the power dynamics within their worlds.

In its various forms, magic is a prominent force in all texts. Through the distorted perspective of inexplicable manifestations and performances – afterlife, hallucinations, dreams, metamorphosis – derived from magic, the examined texts explore the inexplicable enigmas that concern the 'real' worlds of their narratives. They challenge political order, question ontological and epistemological preconceptions and subvert established social conventions and roles. Although each of the six authors deploys magic in unique ways, the next section will concentrate on the shared use of three narrative strategies. Each strategy is a response to three aspects in which magic originates, operates and manifests itself in the texts.

5. Three Narrative Strategies: Immanence, Inversion and Collage

The first strategy concerns epistemological and ontological questions raised by the seamless relationship of magic and the actual world. Rather than being a transcending concept, magic is an *immanent* feature of the characters' worlds, and the boundaries between the seen and the unseen are blurry. The imaginary world depicted in Elphinstone's *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, for instance, embraces objective features which belong to a recognisable world: characters wear 'normal' clothes, live in simple homes and have a primitive / rural life style. The unknown time in which the novels are set, the absence of written texts from the past and the reference to a mysterious 'change' after which the characters' existence has suffered dramatic disruption, are the only elements which could describe the novels as 'marvellous' texts. Nonetheless, ontological and existentialist tensions run through both narratives, as characters seem to be suspended in a perpetual state of disbelief about their world and their role within it. The various sources of mystery within the plots challenge the characters' rational beliefs and destabilise the deceptive stability of their community. The immanence of magic questions any preconceived notion of what is 'real', as magic dissolves aspects of singularly factual evidence, a typical feature of the fantastic genre. In Jackson's words:

> The fantastic exists as the inside or the underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognisable reflection. Hence their symbiotic relationship, the axis of one being the paraxis of the other. The fantastic gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within a dominant 'realistic' order. (p. 25)

In the studied texts, magic is not acknowledged as an *accepted* part of the characters' world or system of beliefs. The enigmas surrounding Thompson's characters Justine and Pandora are never thoroughly solved; the conflict between the giant's world and the real world stays alive throughout Hayton's

Trilogy; Smith's quizzical ghost incessantly questions the boundaries of her afterlife. Magic always initiates conflict between what is 'rationally expected' and what remains 'inexplicable'. The persistence of unsolved enigmas highlights the impossibility of accepting the apparently rational order of the world and emphasise the subversive function of magic in the texts. As magic highlights the impossibility for human beings to comprehend their own world fully, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, the psyche drowns in dilemmas and empirical certainties are annihilated.

Partly derived from its immanence, the second strategy concerns the political and social challenges of magic. Rooted in the real world, magic causes the *inversion* of established social order and conventions. In particular, the inversion operated by magic is a vehicle for gender agenda in the majority of the texts. The irrational essence of magic often creates a sense of uneasiness between sexes, as it causes dilemmas and challenges gender preconceptions. In Hayton's *Trilogy* the monks' and warriors' prejudices against the giant's daughters arise from the women's employment and knowledge of magical practices, as well as from inexplicable events which take place in the giant's house. The magical occurrences clash simultaneously with the monks' dogmatic system and with the warriors' gender preconceptions. To the astonishment of both sets of male characters, the daughters' magic defies the laws imposed by Christianity and castrates the warriors' power. Similarly, in Thompson's *Pandora's Box*, Pandora's uncanny aura and her rebirth into a man question Noah's rational understanding of his world and challenge his gender preconceptions. The essence of Pandora's existence is a continuous challenge as to what really makes gender and a challenge to the conventional interpretation of sexual boundaries.

Gender reversal is the most prominent manifestation of subversive magic in Tennant's *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* and Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*. In Tennant's rewriting of Hogg's and Stevenson's texts, the gender shift facilitates the author's critique of patriarchal society. As in her

predecessors' employment of traditional supernatural and fantasy to deconstruct religious fanaticism and Victorian moral codes, so Tennant's narratives introduce magic as a destabilising force. Her reinterpretation of the double in both novels bears the marks of her feminist agenda. In *The Bad Sister*, in place of religious fanaticism, it is radical feminism that drags Jane's mind into a surreal state of psychological fragmentation. Her exposure to militant feminist extremists and her rejection of traditional gender roles drive the narrative towards the character's psychological and physical dissolution. Similarly, in *The Two Women of London*, resorting to human duplication represents Eliza Jekyll's desperate effort to survive in a patriarchal and consumerist society that has rejected her as the unacceptable Mrs Hyde. Beauty and youth, magically returned to Eliza through a drug concoction, are the only attributes which can allow Eliza to be successful and powerful, while disposing, if only temporarily, of her ugly, aged, distorted self. As in Stevenson's story, the power of the drug has only a limited lifetime, and Tennant's Eliza is faced with the challenge of living as Mrs Hyde forever.

Gender switch can also shift the point of view of an original text. Inspired by Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput* is the story of Lemuel Gulliver's wife, entirely narrated from a female point of view. The shifted perspective results into a paradoxical subversion of the original hierarchy of male centrality and female marginality, 'transposing the terms so that was negative becomes positive'.[50] From her obscure existence in the shadow of her famous husband in Swift's narrative, Mary Gulliver becomes the central character of the story and the maker of her destiny, while Lemuel remains a marginal caricature of her narrative. The central / marginal inversion is highlighted by a more 'magical' subversion, as the story is mostly narrated not by Mary Gulliver, but by her childhood companion, her doll Lady Mary. As well as subverting gender hierarchies, *The Mistress of Lilliput* challenges the rational order of the 'real' world, as Lady Mary's feelings and opinions retell the story of Gulliver's wife. Telling the story from the impossible point of view of a doll, Fell

[50] Sellers, p. 27.

employs the subversive function of magic to distort reality, to deconstruct the established order and play with the potential of an 'impossible narrator'.

A powerful example of 'impossible narrator' is Smith's ghost-narrator in *Hotel World*. As the spirit of the deceased Sara Wilby begins her brief narrative after her fatal accident, Smith presents a 'realistic' story that deals with the inexplicable mystery of afterlife, through the paradoxical point of view of a ghost. The first chapter of *Hotel World* introduces the readers into the liminal space between life and death, the limbo in which the narrator is trapped, while it deconstructs rational binary oppositions of life and death, presence and absence, voice and silence. The subversive function of magic, articulated through the employment of a traditional magical trope (the ghost) and through traditional genre (the ghost-story), plays a destabilising role, abolishing narrative conventions and challenging rational interpretations.

The use of different layers and levels in collage artworks provides a good visual example of the third feature of these magic narratives. *Collage* indicates the deep and surface stratifications within the narratives: at a surface level, are textual layers created by typographic devices, marginalia and illustrations; at a deep level, is the coexistence of different narrative layers which originate from intertextuality, parody and pastiche. To start with the surface level, Gérard Genette's definition of 'paratext' may assist this analysis of textual layers. In his words:

> More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or [...] a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned towards the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about text).[51]

Genette's study focuses on the functions of those elements (epigraphs, prefaces, footnotes, etc.) in a book, which do not belong to the main 'text'. The

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[51] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretations*, trans. By Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

paratext is symptomatically defined through the metaphor of a 'threshold', to signify its ambivalent relationship to the text. Janus-faced, both looking inward and outward, the paratext performs important functions of reinforcement, emphasis, explanation and justification of the text. In different ways, authors can make use of footnotes or prefaces to add strength to their main text or give some ideas more emphasis. I will focus on four particular features of the paratext: typeface (including the use of blank page and of irregular spacing), epigraphs, dedications, and footnotes. The analysis of these paratextual features in the analysed texts should highlight how they are another manifestation of the subversive function of magic within the texts.

Different choices of typeface are perhaps the most subtle paratextual strategies and yet the most intimate to text itself, since typeface is the visual transcription of the text itself. As Genette observes:

> The typesetting – the choice of typeface and its arrangements on the page – is obviously the act that shapes a text into a book. [...] No reader can be completely indifferent to a poem's arrangement on the page – to the fact that it is presented in isolation on the otherwise blank page with one or two other poems or indeed, with notes at the bottom of the page. [...] Likewise, no reader should be indifferent to the appropriateness of particular typographical choices, even if modern publishing tends to neutralize these choices by a perhaps irreversible tendency towards standardization. (Genette 1997, p. 34)

Typographical choices can be extremely relevant to the interpretation of a text, as they reflect, modern publishing allowing, the authors' engagement with their texts. Each of the six authors analysed in this thesis adopts different choices of typeface within their narratives. Both Fell's *The Bad Box* and Hayton's *The Governors* feature italicised typefaces in alternation with 'normal' typefaces. In the two novels, the coexistence of two typefaces reflects the division of the texts into two parallel narratives. Significantly, in both novels, the italicised sections, which are longer in *The Bad Box* and very brief in *The Governors*, signify the main characters' 'psychic' worlds, as opposed to their 'real' worlds, visualised by the 'normal' typeface. Without any other textual explanation about the intrusion of italicised sections within the main texts, the characters' real

existences and the imaginary / schizoid projections are only separated through the threshold provided by this typographic differentiation.

As with the use of different typefaces, blank pages and irregular spacing may signify narrative (and psychological) fragmentation. Thematically fragmented narratives convey a lack of unity and coherence even in their paratext. In Thompson's *Justine*, metanarrative references to Justine's own book reveal that her alleged autobiography *Death is a Woman* is nothing but a collection of blank pages. The concept of *tabula rasa*, crucial in Thompson's fiction, is also reflected in the actual first edition of *Justine*, where the pages are uncut and appear blank. Similarly, Smith's *Hotel World* plays with unconventional typographic spacing and settings. Unconventional spacing throughout the novel enhances the progressive movement of disintegration and the centrifugal forces in the novel. The text begins with the onomatopoeic howling of a ghost:

Wooooooooo-
hooooooo

The opening line is suggestive of the unconventional story the narrator is about to reveal. The seamless continuity between the halved first line and the second one is indicative of the liminal space occupied by the ghost, halfway between life and death. At the end, the novel's circular structure terminates the text with another unconventional use of typeface and spacing, as the ghost's last words are printed in a progressively smaller font towards the bottom of a blank page:

WOoooo –
hoooooo
oo
o

Smith's employment of irregular spacing and font size is a symptomatic exemplification of the authorial desire to exercise ultimate control over her creative product, by engaging her imagination beyond the margins of her text. The use of blank pages and other innovative typographic devices suggests the

liberating function that such texts perform within the culture they belong to. As Craig argues:

> The characters survive the emptiness, the black hole, and the novel celebrates their survival by revealing the author's playful control over the medium which has been the culture's domination and self-repression – typography transformed from jailor to the muse of a culture recovering its authentic voices – regaining control over its typographic representation just as much as over its democratic representation.[52]

Craig stresses the essential function of typographic devices as the ultimate manifestation of authorial intervention on their texts. Acts of dissidence against the rules and conventions of textual practice, these intermittent elements of differentiation within the text, drive the subversive function of magic narratives. Inconsistent, irregular, broken, heterogeneous typefaces represent the destabilising, critical, questioning core of magic texts. Interpretative tensions, resulting from coexistence of the inexplicable 'magic' and the known 'real', radically expand throughout and beyond the text, its thresholds and limits.

Less innovative is the use of dedicatees throughout the texts. The choice of Karl Miller as Tennant's dedicatee of *Two Women of London* reflects one of the traditional functions of dedicatees, of encrypting a message about the text. The link between dedicatee and text is, in this instance, Miller's study on the double genre – *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (1985) – published four years before Tennant's *Two Women of London*. Tennant's decision to dedicate *Two Women of London* to Karl Miller creates anticipation of another example of double literature to the critically aware reader, and perhaps betrays the authorial desire that her text may be included in the canonical 'double' tradition investigated by Miller's study.

Epitaphs appear across a number of the analysed texts. Their function is generally that of anticipating and reinforcing ideas contained in the text. To reinforce the double motif of her text and its fragmentation into two narratives, Tennant places two epigraphs in *The Bad Sister*, one at the beginning of each

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[52] Craig, p. 199.

narrative. 'Double' is the key word, as the last line of the first epigraph – 'float double, swan and shadow' – from William Wordsworth's 'Yarrow Unvisited', performs a similar effect of anticipation, as seen in *Two Women of London*'s dedication to Karl Miller. Moreover, as the word 'shadow' ominously ends the epigraph, a dark nuance is added to the expectation of a 'double' narrative. The novel's focus on the dark double, the unknown other, and the irrational split within Jane Wilde's mind, is further reinforced by the second epigraph, the poem 'Insomnia' by Marina Tzvetayeva, epigraph to 'Jane's Journal', the second-level narrative in *The Bad Sister*. The crucial lines 'Look at my shadow, nothing's here of me' and 'my friends, understand: I'm nothing but your dream' respectively placed at the end the last two stanzas of the poem, reinforce the imagery already present in the first epigraph. At the thresholds of the main narratives, the two epigraphs mark the process of psychological disintegration, hinted through Wordsworth's delicate lines and emphatically sung in Tzvetayeva's powerful lyric.

Thompson's epigraphs to *Justine* (William Shakespeare) and *Pandora's Box* (Hesiod) perform similar functions and their significance is discussed in depth in Chapter Seven. Smith's multiple epigraphs to *Hotel World* (Muriel Spark, William Blake, Edwin Muir, Charles Jenks and Albert Camus) also seem to perform an ordinary function, except for Spark's quote 'Remember you must die', which Smith cleverly reworks at the end of 'Past' and at the very end of the novel, almost as a postscript:

remember
you
must
live

remember
you
most
love

remainder
you
mist
leaf

The transposition of the paratext into main text, highlighted by the decreasing font size, signifies another manifestation of authorial control extending over and beyond the margins of text. When another author's text is moulded to fit into a new text, the result is no longer paratext, but text, and therefore should be discussed as such. Smith's play with Spark's epigraph is discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

Finally, the ultimate marginal feature of a text, the footnote, is found in Hayton's first two volumes of the *Trilogy*, *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters*. In the first volume, the notes are actually printed at the margins of the page, in the fashion of medieval glosses, as they claim to be. In the second volume, their graphic appearance is that of a standardised text, although a different typeface signifies their belonging to an apparently posterior text. Hayton's use of glosses, however, does not technically fit Genette's definition of paratext, in that, they are 'fictional' notes, 'whose sender himself is, on some ground, fictional: disavowing, fictive, or apocryphal' (Genette 1997, p. 340). As the authors of the glosses are part of the fictional world of Hayton's text, they belong to the text of fiction, and their relationship to the main text will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Beside and beyond the paratext, there is another form of narrative layering: the third narrative strategy introduces a discourse on the relationships established between the texts and precedent textual models. The use of intertextuality, parody, pastiche and other forms of rewriting, establishes a link with past tradition. Rewriting a precedent text often represents a critical stance about cultural, political and / or literary conventions. The bond between two texts can take different forms, but the starting point for any discussion on textual cross-reference is the notion that any form of intertextuality originates from some kind of subversion, an act of dissidence against linguistic, political, social or cultural establishment. As summarised by Graham Allen:

> From its beginning the concept of intertextuality is meant to designate a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono)logic. Such language is

> socially disruptive, revolutionary even. Intertextuality encompasses that aspect of literary and other kinds of texts which struggles against and subverts reason, the belief in unity of meaning or of the human subject, and which is therefore subversive to all ideas of the logical and the unquestionable.[53]

Allan's definition of intertextuality underlines how behind any intertextual manifestation is the awareness of the 'revolutionary' character of language. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theories and the rejection of a linguistic binary structure of oppositions had a crucial effect on the theories of intertextuality. In 1968, Derrida's coinage of the word *différance* signposted a theoretical landmark for any subsequent theory on language and text. Starting from the two meanings of the French verb *différer*, Derrida argued the need for a noun embodying both meanings:

> In one case "to differ" signifies non identity; in the other case it signifies the order of the *same*. Yet there must be a common, although entirely different [différante], root within the sphere that relates the two movements of differing to one another. We provisionally give the name *différance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of it's a, it has the advantage of referring to differing, both as spacing / temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation.[54]

Derrida's notion of *différance* disrupts the foundations of traditional Aristotelian logic, as it questions the existence of binary oppositions and defined categories of meaning. If a single word can simultaneously contain its meaning and its opposite, applied to an entire text, Derrida's *différance* is the nucleus of the ambiguous tensions established by intertextuality. Semantic ambiguity is the starting point of poststructuralist theories on language and their influence on critical understanding of intertextuality cannot be underestimated. Ambiguity and ambivalence are key concepts in the theoretical discourse on intertextual practices. Steven Connor emphasises this concept when discussing rewritings derived from specific models:

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[53] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 45.

[54] Jacques Derrida, 'Différance' (1968) in *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. By David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-160 (129-130).

> The practice of fictionally rewriting well-known or culturally central texts can take different forms and have different effects, but a feature that allows it, at least provisionally, to be distinguished from other forms of cultural mimicry is that it consists of a particularised and conscientious attachment to a single textual precedent, such that its departures from its original must be measured in terms of its dependence upon it.[55]

The ambiguously opposite movements of 'departure' and 'attachment' vehicle the textual tension established by the relationship between an original and its rewriting. All forms of intertextuality present a kind of 'double code',[56]resulting from the interaction between two or more texts. Genette prefers his own definition of 'transtextuality' – 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with another text' – [57] that embraces five distinct categories (intertextuality, paratext, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality).

In the studied texts – having discussed the relevance of paratext earlier – intertextuality and hypertextuality are the most prominent transtextual strategies. The majority of the texts make intertextual references to previous texts. Intertextuality takes the form of brief allusions or quotations from texts that interact in different degrees with the main texts, as in Elphinstone's allusion to Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) in *A Sparrow's Flight*, or her quotations from Eliot's *Quartets* (1935) in *The Incomer*. In these instances, the relationship between the new texts and its precedent models is solely provided by a tenuous link of themes and imagery, which Elphinstone's inspiration has drawn from her readings of Eliot. The references to Eliot's poetry are only suggested in Elphinstone's texts to create a stronger sense of mystery within the narratives. In *The Incomer*, the passage quoted from one of the *Quartets* is doubly used to represent the past, as the lines of the poem make allusions to the concept of 'time', and also because the poem is in one of the very few books which have survived the change, and therefore belongs to the unknown past. Similarly, the

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[55] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History (1950-1995)* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 167.

[56] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 183.

[57] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests* (1982), transl. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Empty Lands establish a thematic link with Eliot's *Wasteland*, through their shared references to the legend of Parsifal and the Fisher King. The link is further manifested through the introduction of Tarot imagery, inspired by Elphinstone's reading of Eliot's poem.[58] As in the first novel, these intertextual references are only suggestive of general themes and images, which Elphinstone exploits, to intensify the inexplicable mystery already present in her narratives.

On the other hand, Elphinstone's allusions to the Icelandic saga 'Eirik the Red' in *The Sea Road* and Fell's allusions to Celtic folk tale 'The Deer Princess' in *The Bad Box* establish a deeper and more critical relationship with the original texts. In both instances, original texts are altered to create different versions of the story, or to 'expand' the original story beyond its own boundaries (i.e. the new story can begin before and or end after the original story). Similarly, in Thompson's *Pandora's Box*, an allusion to the myth of Pandora in the paratext (epigraph) is only misleadingly marginal, as the significance of the myth is echoed throughout the narrative. In all these texts intertextuality reveals a subtle subversive function, especially visible in the gender issues encrypted in the new texts. Hayton's *Trilogy* bears links with various Celtic tales within and out with the Arthurian cycle. At times, the allusions become close imitations of specific passages.[59] Such forms of concealed *plagiarism* highlights Hayton's awareness of previous texts and her willingness to engage her own texts with the traditional material they are based upon.

Fewer texts can be ascribed to what Genette calls hypertextuality – 'any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of a commentary' (Genette 1982, p. 5)– although some of the texts hold relationships to specific precedents, in the forms of pastiches, parodies or transpositions, depending on the nature and the mood of the rewriting. Although Elphinstone's short story 'Spinning the Green' makes allusions to several

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[58] See 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.
[59] See Chapter Three.

traditional fairy tales and to fantasy texts such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, stronger and more extensive allusions to *Beauty and the Beast* would define it as a 'pastiche'. The stylistic imitation, fundamental in a pastiche, is revealed through the use of fairy tale formulas and characterisation. The rewriting of the fairy tale, however, does not voice a satirical intention towards a specific genre or author. In fact, behind Elphinstone's pastiche is a critique of political and social issues. Thus the new fairy tale articulates the deconstruction of patriarchal categories encoded in traditional fairy tales and environmental agenda pursued by the author. Similarly, in Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*, the author's intention is not that of mocking Swift or to trivialize *Gulliver's Travels*. Quite the opposite, Fell's 'playful pastiche' must be seen as stylistic manipulation of an original text. It is true, however, that Fell's irony, particularly articulated by the choice of a doll as the chief narrator of the story, does tackle gender issues and mockingly imagines an alternative ending to Mary Gulliver's life.

The inversion of gender roles, already discussed above, is crucial in the three examples of 'serious parody' studied in this thesis: Tennant's *The Bad Sister*, *Two Women of London* and Thompson's *Justine*. In the absence of a specific term, Genette adopts the definition of *transposition* as the genre that exemplifies 'serious parody'. As in the pastiches briefly discussed above, Tennant's and Thompson's use of 'serious' parody holds critical bonds with the precedent texts. Tennant's rewritings of Hogg and Stevenson *transpose* the literary models into a more modern context, and exploit the central themes of duplication to portray a feminist critique of late twentieth century society. Gender is a crucial angle also in Thompson's text, but her rewriting of Sade's *Justine* establishes a more critical relationship with the original, than Tennant's texts do. The patriarchal world and philosophy underlying the hypotext (Sade) is deconstructed and questioned by the hypertext (Thompson's transposition).

Through the three narrative strategies – immanence, inversion and collage – discussed above, magic texts manifest their subversive power, as they all challenge boundaries in different areas and at different levels. The

immanence of magic poses questions of ontological order, challenging the boundaries between the 'seen' and the 'unseen'; magic immanence produces a mixture of 'realistic' and 'fantastic' fiction and this narrative fragmentation makes genre boundaries difficult to place. Similarly, the inversion of political hierarchies, social roles and conventional notions of gender embodies a challenge to political, social and gender categorisation. At its best, magic inverts the known order of things and breaks binary oppositions, thus annihilating the universal validity of acknowledged categories. The *collage* of narrative and textual layers, which characterises all the studied texts, simultaneously questions the most evident and yet subtlest of borders. At a surface level, creative use of typographic devices is the ultimate manifestation of authorial control over the product of its imagination. By going over and beyond the literal margins and not conforming to printing conventions, authors signify an act of literal and metaphorical transgression, and one that cannot be easily dismissed or overlooked. At a deeper level, the relationship established with texts from the past crosses other sets of narrative boundaries. Transtextual references to myth, folk / fairy tales, and literature create ambiguous and ambivalent links, the new narratives underlining the distance from their precedents through the closeness of the rewriting process and transtextual strategies.

The subversions performed through these narrative strategies occur, in varying degrees and combinations, in all the texts. The employment of these strategies constitutes the general framework through which these six very different authors can be studied in a comparative way. Bearing in mind the general framework, each author's different narrative method and style will be discussed in the individual chapters. Before that, in the next section, I will outline the four traditional tropes used in conjunction with the narrative features delineated above.

6.1. Witches, Ghosts, Doubles and Journeys: Four Magical Tropes

Four magical tropes can be identified in the works of the selected authors: witches, ghosts, doubles and magical journeys. The four groups must be interpreted in the broadest sense, as these tropes operate both literally and metaphorically in the texts. Similarly, the four tropes must not be considered as a rigid system of categories, but rather as a set of open themes, often overlapping and merging their reciprocal boundaries in the texts.

The tropes all share similarities in their relationship to tradition and belonging to the supernatural. Before anything else, they are all traditional archetypes and their presence within ancient myths, oral tradition and worldwide literature hardly requires demonstration. In the Scottish context, the strong influence of Celtic folklore and fairy-belief on the literary development has led to a persistent lingering of the supernatural throughout the centuries. Trips to Faerie, evil women, ghostly apparitions and sinister doubles recur in Scottish literary texts – from the fifteenth-century ballad tradition and Makars' poetry to the nineteenth-century Gothic novels and up to twentieth-century postmodernist magic realism – together with other supernatural motifs, the four tropes constitute a conspicuous part of the Scottish cultural and literary context. Scottish beliefs in the supernatural have fascinated and provided inspiration for very diverse poetic and literary works, including James Macpherson's disingenuous imitations in *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) and Robert Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' (1791). The nineteenth century saw the re-blossoming of the supernatural literature partly lost during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods: Walter Scott's collection of traditional ballads, *Minstrelsy* (1801-2), James Hogg's poetry and fiction, Margaret Oliphant's short stories, George MacDonald's *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and shorter fiction signal the revived interest in the supernatural

within the Romantic and Victorian ages. Throughout the twentieth century, the Scottish fascination with the supernatural pervades mainly fiction and drama, acquiring diverse tones and nuances from the surrealism of J.M Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) and Naomi Mitchison's *Beyond this Limit* (1935), to subtler manifestations of ambiguous Scottish demons in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1963), and the postmodernist fantasy of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) and *Poor Things* (1992), to name a few exemplary texts. Similarly, The persistent Scottish interest in supernatural beliefs is demonstrated by the nineteenth century studies such as Hugh Miller's *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835) and Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonologie and Witchcraft* (1884), and by its continuity onto the twentieth century – Marian Mc Neill's *The Silver Bough* (1957-68), Margaret Bennet's *Scottish Customs From The Cradle to The Grave* (1992) – and the new millennium – Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan's *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (2001).

The origin and presence of the four tropes in Scottish culture will be discussed in view of their significant links to literary theories, as the relationship between these traditional cultural archetypes and their literary representations in the texts will be central to our discussion of the specific texts. The employment of these traditional tropes by the six women writers under consideration expresses their desire to engage their texts with cultural and traditional archetypes, while simultaneously, the treatment of these tropes throws light on the differences which signal their departure from tradition.

The presence of witches, ghosts, doubles and journeys indicates the ambiguous bond with the supernatural typical of these magic narratives: witches, for instance, are ambiguous creatures, as their skills place them in an uncanny position between supernatural creatures and human beings; ghosts are the spirits of deceased people, which become supernatural phenomena, as they are trapped in limbo between life and afterlife; doubles are another manifestation of mystery within human existence, whether exemplified by enigmatic duplication or psychological fragmentation of a human being;

journeys epitomise the rite of passage, the experience of yet another intermediate, unknown dimension. The four tropes all refer to an intermediate state between the seen and the unseen, the 'real' and the supernatural worlds. The tropes, therefore, are crucial carriers of the subversive function of magic, insinuating ontological and epistemological dilemmas and challenging political and social order.

6.2. Witches

From the Greek gorgon to the modern 'Femme Fatal', dangerous women have always been popular topics in myth, legends, fairy tales and literature across the world. Consistent ambiguities run through the origin and the development of the witch figure, the archetypal dangerous woman. Positive and negative magic has often been connected to the dangerous nature of women. In Greek myth, the 'sirens' treacherous song and the gorgon's petrifying beauty epitomise negative female magic, while the Sibyls' prophecies embody a positive power.

In the Celtic world, several goddesses and semi-divine creatures were endowed with ambiguously magical powers, derived, more than likely from the ability of women to reproduce, to regenerate life. Far from being evil, witches were often healers and would be of assistance especially in childbirth. They would at times have unpleasant features, hence Anne Ross's definition of 'Divine Hags', to signify simultaneously frightening / desirable semi-divine creatures. The ambivalent nature of these witches in Celtic myth derives from the duality running throughout the whole Celtic divinity system.[60] The complexity of the 'divine hag' of the Celtic world challenges moral and ontological boundaries between good and evil, supernatural and human. The two paradoxes are at the root of the ambiguity embodied by the universal archetype of the witch,[61] and this ambiguity is often reinforced by the appearance of 'dangerous women', evil fairies and 'proper' witches, in traditional ballads, fifteenth-century poetry (William Dunbar, Robert Henryson), eighteenth century's Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*, nineteenth-century short stories (James Hogg's 'Mary Burnett', Walter Scott's 'The Two Drovers'), and the twentieth-century novel (Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, or even Ellen Galford's *The Fires of Bride*).

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[60] Anne Ross, 'The Divine Hags of the Pagan Celts', in *The Witch Figure*, ed. by Venetia Newall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 139-164 (p. 140).

[61] John Widdowson, 'The Witch as a Frightening Figure', in Newall, pp. 200-20 (p. 200).

Always a subversive figure, the witch escapes social conventions and overcomes limits imposed by society, culture and authority.[62] With the advent of Christianity, the witch lost her positive connotation, but her subversive nature became dramatically emphatic. However, even in Christian times, the belief in witchcraft confirms the ambiguity of the phenomenon, since the attempts to find evidence of sexual relationships between witches and demons during witchcraft trials' reveal the metaphysical concerns with the existence of a spiritual world. In those times and cultural contexts, the sexual relationship with non-corporeal creatures could be the crucial proof of the existence of a spiritual dimension, and therefore of God. [63]

This brief outline of the crucial presence of the witch in religion and folk tradition should help to highlight the persistence of the ambiguities of the 'traditional' witch figure in literary representations. Feminist critics have argued that the witch's problematic presence within a community and her alleged supernatural skills and relationships with the Otherworld are all representations of the subversive function embodied by the threatening female 'otherness'. Feminist writers have often used metaphors affiliated to the 'witch', to signify the destabilising power of women's self-determination and dissidence. In Cixous and Clément's analysis of the link between women's power and madness, the sorceress is a crucial representation of *The Newly Born Woman*:

> This feminine role, the role of sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms – the attacks – revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited. The sorceress heals, against the Church's canon; she performs abortions, favors nonconjugal [sic] love, converts the unlivable space of a stifling Christianity. The hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated folding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason.[64]

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[62] Lydia Gaborit, Yveline Gusdon and Myriam Boutrolle-Caporal, 'Witches', in *A Companion to Literary myths, heroes and archetypes*, ed. by Pierre Brunel (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 1163-1178.

[63] See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers. Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 17.

[64] Cixous and Clément, p. 5.

Epitomised by the sinister sorceress, the 'feminine role' is associated with a critical rebellion against established rules, laws and conventions. The sorceress's social dissidence provokes threatening instability in any given society's whose codes are challenged by her presence. The witch, the hysteric, the dangerous woman, then, become metaphors for women's destabilising force, and significantly, they articulate gender agenda hidden in literary texts by men and women. The ambiguities inherent to the subversive witch are mirrored in the patriarchal cultural archetypes of female characters. The opposite 'angel' and 'monster' – Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue – have ambiguously coexisted in the representations of female characters for centuries:

> Male dread of women, and specifically the infantile dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female 'charms' underlies the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphynx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy.[65]

Like Gilbert and Gubar's 'Madwoman in the Attic', the witch takes critical stances against gender categorisation. Her non-conforming to traditional 'feminine' roles of motherhood and wifehood, her independent status is a further expression of her threatening, unstable, social position. Her 'unjustified' femaleness, therefore, challenges gender roles and categorisation, rejecting the identification of woman as mother or wife, and questioning any gender preconceptions. In this way, the witch embodies Butler's position against any 'stable notion of gender',[66] deconstructing the binary oppositions between gender and the established hierarchical order derived from it.

In Elphinstone's early novels, Naomi is associated with the witch figure. Two elements affiliate Naomi to the traditional witch. First, her fiddle, which reproduces classical music from the past, evokes the unknown era enigmatically. The past is an unsolved mystery for the communities of the future

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[65] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 34.

[66] Butler 1990, p. 9.

imagined in *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*. The music reminiscent of the unfathomable past has almost a bewitching effect on the community. Secondly, Naomi's social status, like the archetypal outcast sorceress, destabilises the apparent order of the communities. A suspicious stranger, the distrustful outsider, Naomi struggles to be accepted, like a witch. Significantly, the suspicions about the incomer are channelled through the uncanny prejudice that Naomi might hide a supernatural side and the attempt to marginalize her reveals the destabilising effect she has on the community.

In *The Sea Road*, witchcraft is more overtly part of the eleventh century story. Gudrid, the main character, is a skilled sorceress, recently converted to Christianity. The coexistence of pagan and Christian beliefs makes Gudrid a complex witch. Although her conversion has partly disempowered her pagan skills, the coalescence of two sets of beliefs in Gudrid's soul questions the validity of both. Such conflict becomes more manifest when comparing Elphinstone's rewriting to the original Icelandic source, known as 'Eirik the Red' or 'Eirik's Saga'. In the saga, although knowledgeable about witchcraft, Gudrid is unwilling to use her spells after her conversion, as Christianity and paganism are seen as two incompatible categories of belief. By contrast, Elphinstone's Gudrid is free to hold both beliefs and her temptation to employ magic even after her conversion signals the flexible boundaries between Christian faith and pagan spiritualism.

Conflict between Christianity and paganism is at the core of Hayton's *Trilogy*. The giant Usbathaden's daughters are all skilled sorceresses. Their supernatural powers make them stronger than human beings and therefore frightening creatures to the human witnesses of their skills. Hayton's witches are strongly reminiscent of the Celtic tradition behind them: their healing powers and ability to take zoomorphic shapes are typical features of Celtic goddesses.[67] Magical powers are the expression of the mythical birth of the giant's unions with human partners, but whereas the giant is immortal, his daughters are only semi-mortal and follow perpetual cycles of births, deaths

[67] See Ross 1973, pp. 53-54.

and rebirths until the giant is killed. The giant's death signifies also the end of their rebirth cycles and the descent of some of them into the human world. Because of their ambivalent half human / half mythic essence, the daughters' relationships with the human world are problematic. Difficulties arise primarily from their supernatural powers, which marginalise them from other human beings. The monks, who narrate the vicissitudes of Marighal, Barve and Essullt, three of the giant's daughters, have difficulties in acknowledging the magical element of the giant's world and his daughters. Their unease is translated into their attempts to tame their magical skills and epitomises the need to control and the struggle for power between the two juxtaposed worlds and genders.

Tennant's employment of the witch trope brings the ancient figure into a modern dimension. Even if *The Bad Sister*, *Two Women* of *London* and *Wild Nights* are all set in modern times, however, the witch character retains her archetypal ambiguity. In *The Bad Sister*, Meg is quintessentially ambiguous: a member of a feminist commune, she is also an obsessive character who haunts Jane, the protagonist of the story. Whether Meg really existed and had supernatural powers or whether she is a figment of Jane's imagination, the truth remains undisclosed throughout the novel.

The ambiguity of Tennant's Mrs Hyde is manifested in a very different way and is underlined by a comparison with Stevenson's Mr Hyde: unlike Stevenson's Mr Hyde, whose horrifying presence is only witnessed by few, Mrs Hyde is well known in Ms Jekyll's neighbourhood and shares the same acquaintances. The geographical closeness of the two characters makes the frightening enigma about Mrs Hyde's existence even more sinister and disturbing. Furthermore, whereas in Stevenson's text, both Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde have no families, Mrs Hyde is a mother and lives with her children. Tennant's feminisation of Stevenson's narrative intensifies the ambiguities of her double character. If the monster turns female, child-bearing becomes an unavoidable issue. The paradox embodied by the pre-Christian Celtic goddess, mother and warrior at the same time, is crucial in Tennant's ambiguous creation

of Mrs Hyde, who is mother and murderer, victim and attacker, struggling in a society which has denied her everything and marginalised her existence.

Witchcraft is also one of the manifestations of the magic realist atmosphere in *Wild Nights*. One of the characters of the family saga, Aunt Zita, although seemingly human, performs supernatural deeds. While she is able to summon up her dead sisters and fly away at her leisure, Zita's nurturing of a perennial fire by her side is linked to the natural cycles that pace the rhythm of the story. Within the cyclic saga Zita's function is subversively disruptive: her incestuous relationship with one of her brothers causes fragmentation and the abrupt climatic changes linked with her actions also emphasise her metaphysical characterisation.

Witches assume more understated contours in Thompson's fiction. Thompson's transtextual references to myth and literature highlight continuity with and simultaneously signal departure from the traditional witch. Like the archetypal witch, Thompson's women are dangerous and charming at the same time; in both *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*, the protagonists are sinisterly beautiful. These dangerous women's ambiguities inevitably convey enigmas: their mysterious existences remain unsolved and their metamorphic looks make their identity and definition inconsistent.

Thompson's reinterpretation of the witch trope allows her to make statements against gender categorisation, and to endorse her texts with gender theories. There is a fundamental difference between Sade's *Justine* and Thompson's *Justine*. In the former, twin sisters embody virtue (Justine) and vice (Juliette), while in Thompson's rewriting, good and evil coexist in one woman. By merging the two stereotyped women – the 'virgin' and the 'whore' – into a single, enigmatically sinister figure, Thompson plays with the ambiguity of the witch figure and creates a character who can be beautiful and monstrous, kind and cruel, elegant and vulgar. Similarly, in *Pandora's Box*, the Greek myth of Pandora, the dangerous woman *par excellence*, is adopted by Thompson to create the most subversively dangerous woman. Thompson's Pandora escapes definition and transgresses gender categorisation. The mystery of her

disappearance and her rebirth as a man signal the extreme consequences of Pandora's enigmatic ambivalence. Like Justine, Pandora derives her sinister features from a tradition of dangerous women. Thompson employs and exploits tradition to suit her agenda and makes a statement about gender categories and rational ontological boundaries.

6.3. Ghosts

Like the witch archetype, the ghost has been a prominent presence widely spread in folk traditions both in Scotland and worldwide. Ghosts can take different names and appear in various shapes. The variety of names – 'spirits', 'revenants', 'zombies', 'spectres' – attributed to the supernatural apparitions of ghosts exemplify the variety of nuances of the phenomenon. Some of the synonyms of 'ghosts' – 'revenants' for example – suggest that ghost lore derived from the belief that the spirits of the dead might come back to visit the living. [68] Linked with ghost lore is the concept of haunted places. In pre-Christian Scotland, every cave, hill, glen and loch would have its spirits and superstitions tied to its name.[69] In Scottish folklore, the extensive variety of haunted locations is possibly derived from the Celtic belief that the Otherworld was not separated from this world.[70] It has also been suggested that the features of some distinctive landscapes could influence the relationship between the culture of a specific community and their shared imagination. This is what John Berger calls 'address to the landscape':

> By 'address' I mean what a given landscape addresses to the indigenous imagination: the background of meaning which a landscape suggests to those familiar with it. It begins with what the eye sees at every dawn, with the degree to which it is blinded at noon, with how it feels assuaged at sunset. [...] The address of western Ireland or Scotland is tidal, recurring, ghost-filled. (This is why it makes sense to talk about a Celtic landscape.) [71]

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[68] 'Among the persistent hypotheses which language reflects are that the ghost is something which *returns* (*Revenant*), which returns *deliberately* (*Visitant*); which sometimes returns *often* to a particular place or person (the *Haunting Ghost*); and which on occasion returns *malignly* (*Poltergeist*, *Zombie*). Underlying all such words is the tradition persistent in common belief in all societies, that something in the nature of intelligence of personalities survives bodily death'. Ralph Noyes, 'The Other Side of Plato's Wall', in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, ed. by Peter Buse and Andrew Statt (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), pp. 244-262, (pp. 245-6).

[69] See Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 184. See also Anne Ross, *The Folklore of the Highlands* (London: Batsford, 1976), pp. 12-13.

[70] For a further discussion on Celtic Britain and the evolution of folk tradition in Scotland see Ross 1976 and *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). See also Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[71] John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (1991) (New York: Vintage International, 1992), pp. 68-69.

Undoubtedly, landscape is paramount in Celtic belief and folklore. Scottish spirits would not belong to an unreachable heaven but in fact could be encountered in a magical wood or by a waterfall. While only some heroic characters could access 'Fairyland', conversely fairies would often be visiting and appearing in the human world. Among folk beliefs, the apparition of ghosts has certainly been one of the most frightening. Unlike fairies, ghosts are not entirely supernatural creatures. In fact, ghosts are thoroughly human, while, simultaneously, embodying the mystery of afterlife; trapped in the liminal space, the borderline dimension between life and death, they represent a human realm of uncertainty.[72] Margaret Oliphant's 'The Open Door' (1882) and George MacKay Brown's 'Andrina' are but two powerful examples of the persistent presence of ghost trope in nineteenth- and twentieth- century Scottish literature. In both texts, the presence of ghosts challenges rational understanding, as both Oliphant's doctor and MacKay Brown's narrator are baffled by the inexplicable nature of the supernatural occurrences. The smallest details, a missing juniper bush in 'The Open Door' or an unopened letter in 'Andrina', disturbingly speak of a paradoxical relationship with the supernatural ghosts.

Whatever the degree of ghost beliefs in the modern world, ghosts are still strongly present and have become increasingly prominent not only in literature but also in the discourse about postmodernist and poststructuralist texts. In particular, poststructuralist literary theories have focused on the metaphor of the ghost to signify the overcoming of binary oppositions of structuralism. This is why ghosts are fundamental metaphors to understand Derridean theory of deconstruction, as summarised by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott:

> The relevance of a trope of spectrality to deconstruction is clear. Ghosts are neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences. As such, they are the stock-in-trade of the Derridean enterprise, standing in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death. [...] In the figure of the ghost, we see that past and present cannot be neatly separated from one another, as any idea of the present is always constituted through the difference and deferral of the past, as well as anticipations of the future.[73]

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[72] Buse and Statt, p. 3.
[73] Buse and Statt, pp. 10-11.

Symbolising the unknown, the ghost assumes more disturbing and destabilising contours in association with the concept of the uncanny. Ghosts represent the fear of the unknown, the tension between rationality and irrationality, the grey spaces left between what can and cannot be explained. They embody the intermediate gaps, a disturbing void annihilating consistency in epistemological and ontological strongholds. Cixous underlined these ambiguities in the ghost, in her discussion of Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny':

> Everything remains to be said on the subject of the Ghost and the ambiguity of the Return, for what renders it intolerable is not so much that it is an announcement of death nor even the proof that death exists, since this Ghost announces and proves nothing more than his return. What is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between states, neither alive nor dead [...].[74]

The ghost embodies and evokes an intermediate status. The concept of liminality, the borderline zone of uncertainty, is crucial in the modern employment of ghosts as fictional characters or metaphors for any form of liminality, for ghosts always signify that boundaries between life and death, past and present, seen and unseen are blurred.

Elphinstone's early novels, *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, are set in an unknown time dimension. Although their society seems to be based in pre-modern times (there are no printed books and the economy is mainly rural), references to modern times as 'past' suggest that it is set in an imaginary future era. To the characters of these communities, the past is, metaphorically, a ghost. Nothing is known about the past, because almost everything has been destroyed in the catastrophic 'change'. Behind the apparently settled and idyllic façade, Elphinstone's future world is far from utopian, as the fragile balance, reconstructed in the communities after the catastrophe, is sinisterly haunted by inexplicable mysteries, ghostly ruins and broken texts from a past whose knowledge is feared. Like a ghost, the past is unknown and the uncertainty makes it difficult to approach.

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[74] See Hélène Cixous 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's 'Das Unheimliche' ('The Uncanny'), *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), pp. 525-48 (543).

The two protagonists of the novels, Naomi and Thomas, have to face the ghosts from the past on many occasions. Naomi's music, the classical music lost in the oblivion of the past, constitutes in itself the ghost that simultaneously reaches and frightens people's souls. Similarly, Thomas's 'Empty Lands' epitomise the ghostly aftermath of the past catastrophe. The deserted lands are the primary expression of man-made destruction. Man has caused the 'change', the dramatic transformation that took place in the past and that has changed the communities' lives forever. Elphinstone's environmental concerns creep into the agenda of the novels. Behind the past is the ghost of environmental destruction perpetrated by the careless actions of human beings. This is why the ghost of the past is frightening: it is the memory and the warning of the catastrophe caused by the ruthless greed of human beings. Nothing could stop evil from creeping back, like a ghost, into the superficially innocent world of *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*.

Literal and metaphorical ghosts are crucial when discussing Smith's preoccupations with absence. In her first novel, *Like*, absence is primarily defined by the physical distance between the two protagonists, Amy and Ash, as both recollect their stories years after their encounter, when they are far away from each other. More subtle and sinister motifs of absence, however, are concealed in the two narratives of *Like*, as ambiguously suggested by the names of the two characters, Amy and Ash, evocative of love and death. Their distance assumes more morbid significances in the narrative constellated with references to haunted locations and ghostly entities. Similarly, disappearance is subtly hinted in the short story 'A Story of Folding and Unfolding'. Here, although death is not overtly mentioned, a woman's absence becomes the central motif of the story. Elsewhere, absence is the result of physical death. During their bereavement, characters begin to question limits between life and afterlife. Death is an indefinite process, whose beginning and end are not safely pinned down. Instead, memories of the recently dead haunt characters, as in the short story 'College' and in *Hotel World*.

Hotel World plays specifically with the ghost story as a genre. At the beginning of the novel, the spirit of deceased Sara introduces herself and tells her own version of the parallel set of the stories. Smith's unconventional use of a ghost first-person narrator forces a suspension of disbelief, right at the beginning of an otherwise realistic plot. The fact that a 'realistic' story is told by a ghost challenges ontological certainties as to what is 'real' in the narrative world of the novel. Simultaneously, from a genre point of view, *Hotel World* stretches the boundaries of realism and the fantastic, allowing the ghost, a supernatural creature, to tell her 'realistic' story.

6.4. Doubles

Like ghosts and witches, doubles ambiguously liaise between the seen and the unseen, the living and the dead, the physical world and the impalpable realm of magic. Greek mythology is rich with examples of double legends and myths,[75] but the origin of the double goes further back. According to anthropologist Otto Rank, primitive man recognised in his shadow or his reflected image the presence of his immortal part, in other words, the soul.[76] With the advent of Christianity, the pagan shadow evolved into the Guardian Angel,[77] although even in Christianity doubles could be carriers of good and evil.[78] In fact, in Scottish folklore, the apparition of a 'wraith' would often imply the forthcoming death of the beholder or somebody close to the witness of the uncanny event.[79]

In the early twentieth century, psychoanalysis gave a new impulse to the theories on the double.[80] It is impossible to dwell here on the relevance of Freud's theories on the unconscious and the fragmentation of the human psyche for subsequent literature and literary criticism on the double. In the last half of the twentieth century, the appearance of numerous critical studies on the topic testify to the persistent fascination with the double, and the diversity of its

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[75] See, for example, Narcissus's falling in love with his own reflection in a mirror of water; similarly, Persephone's conception of Dionysus while looking at her own image reflected in a mirror. For a further discussion on the occurrence of the double in Greek mythology, see Otto Rank, 'The Double as Immortal Self', *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1941) pp. 62-101 (p. 88, p. 97); Greek mythology accounts for several versions of the birth of Dyonisus: see Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 721-725 and pp. 112-114.

[76] See Otto Rank, *Psychology and The Soul* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1961), p. 13.

[77] See John Herdman, *The Double In Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 3.

[78] Anthropological and folklore studies have revealed that several cultures across Africa and Asia, for example, would hold beliefs against twins. For a more detailed discussion on the role played by twins in the development of double beliefs and superstitions see C. F. Keppler, *The Literature of The Second Self* (Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1972); J. Rendel Harris, *Boanerges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913); E. Sidney Hartland, 'Twins', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1911-58 ed., vol. XII, pp. 491-500; Rank 1941.

[79] Herdman, p. 2.

[80] See Sigmund Freud, 'Lecture 31', *New Introductory Lectures*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 24 vol., ed. and transl. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964) vol. 22, pp. 57-80; See also vol. 18, pp. 105-110;

literary representations as schizoid narratives, fragmented texts, individual and cultural dissociation.[81] Narratives of the double are always concerned with a conflict between opposing forces, which often coexist in the one character's psyche, in Karl Miller's worlds: 'duality [...] is a word which refers both to the facts of human instability and uncertainty, and to the uncertain comprehension of these facts'.[82] Doubles can represent repressed identities, fantasies, or traumatic dissociations. In the Scottish cultural context, James Hogg's *Private Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* represent the most celebrated examples of a strong tradition of duality, and Hogg's schizoid tale and Stevenson's story of human duplication are both powerful references in several of the studied texts.

As in most traditional novels of the doppelgänger, in the present texts, doubles always present the tension between rational and supernatural interpretations, leaving narratives open to interpretation. As well as a theme, the double is often reflected in narrative structure, exemplified in different forms of narrative division, fragmentation and juxtaposition. The split brought in by the double trope often results in multiple layers of division, highlighted in the text, structure, plot, characterisation and imagery.

In Elphinstone's short story 'An Apple from a Tree', Alison's strange alter ego, Nosila, descended into Alison's twentieth-century Edinburgh from a parallel edenic world, performs a subversive role. Similar in size to her human double, Nosila represents Alison's uncivilised, or pre-civilised twin. Nosila's innocence is alarming, because she is not aware of any social conventions. Her primitively naive nakedness is a threat and a challenge to the moral codes and social order of Alison's world. Although Nosila comes from a parallel world accessible through the bite of a magical apple, Elphinstone's use of the double highlights the tensions of Alison's 'real' world.

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[81] See C. F. Keppler, *The Literature of The Second Self* (Tucson: The University of Arizona, 1972); Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); T. E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

[82] Miller, p. 32.

Two parallel narratives alternate in Fell's *The Bad Box*. Isla's realistic story is repeatedly interrupted by the Hind Girl's supernatural story. The relationship between the two stories and the two heroines is never explained. A psychological reading may be plausible, admitting that the Hind Girl is a projection of Isla's imagination. However, this dream activity is never suggested with clarity in the text, even though it is undeniable that the Hind Girl's story reveals details that resemble Isla's vicissitudes. It is quite likely that the creation of Isla's alter ego derives from Fell's reading of Celtic folk tales, during her upbringing in the Scottish Highlands.[83] Fell's reading of folk tales is behind the creation of the Hind Girl. In particular, the West Highland version of a widely spread folk tale, 'The Deer Princess' reveals similarities between the two texts. While adopting the traditional tale of the union between the fairy and the human, Fell employs the story to create the system of dualities that run within both the Hind Girl's plot and Isla's plot. The two stories are parallel and the motifs of conflict and division underline the similarities between the two stories.

Conflict, duality and fragmentation define the use of the double in Hayton's characterisation and the plots of the *Trilogy* and *The Governors*. In the first volume of the *Trilogy*, the appearance of Marighal's double, who substitutes Marighal and marries Kynan in her place, is understood later as the result of her father's intervention. Typically in a narrative double, the enigma of Marighal's double remains unsolved until the end of the novel. However, the puzzling riddle of Marighal's double is only one of the several manifestations of dualities running through the *Trilogy*. Different sets of dualities reveal the complex dynamics of conflicting forces governing the narrative: real world and Giant's world, men (monks and warriors) and women (giant's daughters), Christian and pagan beliefs. At the core of the *Trilogy* is the conflict of these oppositions and the quest embarked to solve the issues.

Hayton's fascination with the double reoccurs in *The Governors*. Everything in the novel speaks of duality: there are two narratives, two narrators and a main character who has two names (Hester and Hesione) and who

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[83] See 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

travels between a 'real' and an imaginary world. The origin of *The Governors*' duality stems from Hester / Hesione fragmented psyche. Her increasing mental split causes the hallucinatory state in which an imaginary submarine world slowly takes shape. Hesione's voyage into the abyss allows her to recuperate her original identity, epitomised by the recuperation of her mythical name, chosen by her father and rejected by the protagonist. The imagery of the marine world is facilitated by Hayton's employment of traditional Celtic material: the world of the selkies is adopted to constitute one of the subplots of *The Governors*. Because of their half-human, half-animal shape, selkies are both natural creatures and supernatural characters: their ambiguity is constantly emphasised in the complex narrative which mixes psychoanalysis and superstition to solve the conflicts within Hester / Hesione's existence.

Although Smith's fiction does not directly engage with the double in her fiction, her first novel *Like* reveals links to the double trope. The significance of the two characters' names, their suggestive semantic closeness to love (Amy) and death (Ash) is indicative of duality and opposition between love and death, beginning and ending, dream and reality. The division of the novel into two separate narratives suggests that duality performs a relevant function in the structure of the novel. The narrative division is reinforced by the employment of two points of view, Amy's and Ash's, the latter used in the form of first person memoirs. The coexistence of the two points of view reveals inconsistencies or, at least, highlights differences between the two characters' perceptions of their past. As in the all the other texts dealing with the double, questions arise about the reliability of either point of view and the possibility of knowing the 'full' story.

Tennant's use of the double also refers to a distinctive Scottish tradition. In *The Bad Sister*, as in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, the double is ultimately a manifestation of two forces which govern the story: prejudice and psychosis. The two elements create the tensions that lurk behind the sinister double murder in the story. Until the end of the two narratives, it is not clear who has been responsible for the murder of Jane's father and half-sister. Until the end it is also not clear whether Meg, who replaces Hogg's Gil-martin, is a real

character or one of Jane's delusions. Just as Hogg had succeeded in keeping both a psychological and a supernatural interpretation of his story alive, likewise, Tennant multiplies the different versions of the truth in an inextricable web of witnesses, confessions and revelations, in her rewriting of the Scottish double.

Tennant also amplifies the trope of human duplication employed by Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. While making a conscious reference to the nineteenth-century Scottish novella, Tennant exploits the trope to suit her twentieth-century gender agenda, as Stevenson's concerns about Victorian moral codes defied by Dr Jekyll's experiments are transposed into Eliza Jekyll's ultimate strategy of survival in the twentieth century. Precociously aged by a nervous breakdown, Eliza has become the hideous Mrs Hyde, the social outcast, ostracised from 'good' London society, rejected by her husband and unable to pursue a career. The only remedy for her survival is the magic concoction of drugs able to rejuvenate her looks and supply her with a new identity. With Mrs Hyde left behind, Eliza Jekyll can briefly fulfil her dream of fitting into the consumerist society that demands her to be an icon of perpetual youth and flawless beauty. Tennant's gender shift and reversal of Stevenson's metamorphosis formula succeeds in undermining the society represented by *Two Women of London*. The references to the Thatcher decade of individualism, consumerist mentality and the patriarchal order still victimising women, all fit Tennant's tale of transformation and the dream of eternal beauty which the author combines in her transposition of Stevenson's story.

Gender is also a paramount issue in Thompson's tale of the double, *Justine*. Thompson's *Justine* merges two previous Sadeian novels and eponymous heroines: Justine and Juliette. In addition to Sade, the text makes hidden references to other novels belonging to the tradition of the double: Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) both feature as encrypted references in the narrative of *Justine*. These literary references alert the reader to the presence of the double trope from the early stages of the narrative, when the two characters, Justine and Juliette, have yet

to appear. From the apparently realistic frame of the beginning of the narrative, absolute truths and fixed identities slowly collapse to leave the first- person narrator and the readers lost in a maze of multiple, changing faces all belonging to the same enigmatic woman: like Tennant, Thompson's use of the double creates distortion and semantic disorientation.

6.5. Journeys

Voyages into the Otherworld and magical quests are familiar themes in myth, fairy tale and traditions across the world. From the pagan notion of death as a journey into a different dimension to the Christian representation of the soul's voyage to the Otherworld after death, trips into the unknown have been constant features in myth and religion. In the African cosmogony, the dynamic aspect of creation stresses the emphasis of journeying as part of initiatory rituals for mythological heroes.[84] Similarly, in classical Greece and Rome, mythical voyages constituted a large part of myth and literature, including the *Odyssey*, the *Argonautica* and the *Aeneid*.[85] In the Celtic world, although the location of the Otherworld was on earth, only heroes and elect human beings were allowed to visit this dimension otherwise unknown and inaccessible to any human being.[86]

Magical journeys are of two types. The first type, the journey into the Otherworld, presupposes a different world, completely separated from the world of the traveller. The second type, the magical quest, is a trip within the 'real' world, which, however, reveals unexpected magical features. In the first case the movement is transcendent and the magic belongs to a parallel world. In the second, the movement is immanent and the magic belongs to the same world as that of the 'realistic' characters. In Greek myth, both types of journeys are undertaken by two famous heroes: Orpheus's trip to the Hades to bring his wife Euridice back to the earth epitomises the first type of journey into the Otherworld; Ulysses' enterprise through the mythical Mediterranean world inhabited by Cyclops and Sirens, represents the second type of journey, the magical quest.

In Scottish literature, magical voyages have been consistently present in fiction. From ballad tradition ('Thomas the Rhymer') to early twentieth-century drama and fiction – J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) and Naomi Mitchison's

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[84] Nicole Goisbeault, 'African Myths', in Brunel, pp. 24-29.
[85] See Françoise Graziani, 'Discoveries' , in Brunel, pp. 317-324.
[86] See Hutton, p. 184.

'Beyond this Limit' (1935) – the trope of the magical journey is also strongly present in late twentieth century Scottish fiction: Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) and Iain Banks's *The Bridge* (1990) both employ the journey trope in the surreal contexts of postmodernist narratives. Throughout centuries of literary history and across different genres, it is not surprising that the trope is extremely relevant when borders and boundary crossing are of crucial importance, especially when discussing non-realistic literary genres. As summarised by Lucie Armitt:

> References to borders and frontiers have always been the staple discourse of outer-space fiction. If fantasy is about being absent from home (the abandoned child or assertive voyager of the fairy tale, the science fiction traveller or pioneer, and the inhabitant of the gothic mansion who finds her space invaded from within by the presence of the uncanny), then the inhabitant of the fantastic is always the stranger.[87]

Magical journeys embody the metaphor of border crossing, in the overcoming of known thresholds to explore the world beyond the safety of rational knowledge. As travellers begin to explore unknown territories, the journey epitomises the questioning process which underlies magic narratives. The dream atmosphere that frequently sets the scene of these magical adventures often enhances the investigative nature of such journeys. The oneiric contours of the journeys highlight the possibility of psychological interpretations of the journeys as trips through and into the characters' unconscious. The journey might sweep away all ontological and epistemological certainties, throwing the traveller into the disordered realm of metaphysical doubting. Yet, deconstruction of certainties, questioning of rational knowledge, challenging of ontological boundaries are necessary steps to undertake the magical journey into the unknown.

The journey is yet another metaphor for the overcoming of boundaries. Magical journeys signal the subversive desire to transgress authority and conventions. As a result of the journey, of the confrontation with the world beyond, inevitably changes affect the characters and their worlds.

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[87] Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 8.

Journeying, especially in the form of magical quest, is a central motif in Elphinstone's fiction. The early novels, *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, follow the movements of the travelling fiddler Naomi. The circular structure of the novels shows Naomi at the beginning and at the end of her journeys to Clachanpluck and the Empty Lands, and highlights the importance of journeying in the stories. Naomi's magical quests take place in the 'real' world, although Thomas's Empty Lands in *A Sparrow's Flight* have more surreal contours than Clachanpluck. In the nightmarish atmosphere of the post-change Empty Lands, as in Clachanpluck, the borderlines between dream and reality are not always clear and these inexplicable mysteries cause Naomi and other characters to question their knowledge of their world and history. The epistemological search pervades the journeys across the imaginary communities, often raising questions about the possibility of knowing and of communicating.

The very title of *The Sea Road* suggests that the central motif of the novel is, again, a journey. Set in a realistic narrative, Gudrid's journey to 'Green land' [sic], gradually acquires dreamlike twists. Green land is still beyond the boundaries of the known world, as it does not feature in the cartographers' maps. Since the lands are not officially chartered, supernatural events acquire even more mysterious significance and explore the nature of the boundaries between the 'known' and the 'unknown'. Similarly, the surreal encounters with quirky creatures in *An Apple from a Tree*, the visionary element of the adventures camouflages the journeys into dreams, enhancing the psychological significance of the stories. The contact established with the Otherworld is crucial for the characters' reflections on their own world, their language and, ultimately, their existence.

In Hayton's *Trilogy* quests are also central motifs for the development of the plot. Marighal, Barve and Essult all embark on strenuous journeys. The journeys take the shape of immanent magical quests, because they take place in worlds recognisable by the characters. The daughters' journeys epitomise the desire for self-determination and freedom from the boundaries of paternal authority represented by the fortress. Beyond the walls of the fortress,

circumscribing the magical world of the giant lies the 'real' world, which the three daughters experience and conquer in different ways, but all driven by the same desire for freedom and self-determination. The conflict between their magical world and their experience of the human world is inevitable, but it signals the movement towards their freedom.

In *The Governors* the trope of the magical journey also plays a central role. Hesione's journey is a downward descent into the abyss of her subconscious. Apparently set in a parallel world, the submarine adventure reflects a psychological condition and function as a self-healing journey to recuperate Hesione's fragmented identity. This psychological interpretation of the journey is reinforced by Hayton's intertextual allusions to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, especially at the crucial moment of the transgressing of the boundary ('the door on the wall') between the 'real' world and the dream world. The experience of an irrational, magical world, where conventions and moral codes clash with those of her own 'real' world, allows Hesione's return to a more fulfilling existence in her own 'real' world.

Travelling is central in Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*, Mrs Gulliver's travels retrace her husband's previous adventures on a quest to find her beloved husband lost in the South Seas. Mary Gulliver's quest follows a double path of self-determination. Deprived of any education and constantly censored for her sensuality by her Presbyterian upbringing and her marriage to a puritan Lemuel Gulliver, Mary's journey to the surreal land of Lilliput is a quest for psychological and sensual fulfilment for her dissatisfied soul and body. The name of the boat on which Mary and her doll companion sail off to the South Seas reveals the origin of both quests. The 'Aphrodite' is indeed both a reference to the classical world, which Mary begins to appreciate through her extensive reading during the journey, and an allusion to the sensual pleasure, and true love that Mary is about to experience. Indeed, Mary's journey proves to be a challenge both to her mind and her body, as the character widens the boundaries of her intellectual and sensual existence.

The magical voyages delineated above create a bond between the 'real' and the 'magical' world. This ambiguous relationship between the seen and the unseen, the dimension recognisable by the characters on one side, and various manifestations of inexplicable magic on the other, underlies all the tropes analysed in this section. Like magical voyages, witches, ghosts and doubles all belong to the intermediate space, between the seen and the unseen, the explicable and the inexplicable. These tropes are vehicles for the philosophical questions underlying the modern Scottish texts analysed in this thesis. In these texts, the boundaries between the explicable and the inexplicable become gradually less discernible. The uncanny is increasingly understood to be part of the world that characters recognise as their own. The persistent presence of 'immanent magic', the tension between the seen and the unseen, the metaphysical links between this and the Otherworld are recognised features of a distinctively Scottish cultural and literary tradition. From the Celtic belief that the Otherworld is nowhere else but on earth, throughout myth and folk tradition the coexistence of Fairyland and the human world has been crucial to the development of a supernatural theme in Scottish literature. Although the identified tropes are universal cultural archetypes, their treatment is undoubtedly linked to 'mainstream' Scottish culture and literature.

7. Avoiding the 'F' Words: A Scholar's Journey from Fantasy to Magic

> We use the word *magic* so often that it means too much, and therefore hardly anything. Anthropologists assign very specific meanings to *magic*, but most people say that something is magical if it is extraordinary, if it defies commonplace experience or even the laws of nature.[88]

> Although notions of magic differ slightly from writer to writer, there is a remarkable consensus among fantasy writers [...]: magic, when present, can do almost anything, but obeys certain rules according to its nature. Generally ideas as to its nature are left undefined.[89]

> Situated as we are on the far side of the Age of Realism, it's all too easy to forget that most of the stories we've told ourselves and each other down through the ages have not been realist stories. The mirror held up to nature by fiction – to recall Hamlet's image of the work of theatrical story-telling – has tended to be the mirror of metaphor, and its reflections have been oblique and opaque. [...] For most of our history, [...] our narrative tastes have been for the epic adventure, the romantic quest, the fantastic voyage, the magical mystery.[90]

The truth about magic is that it escapes definition. If it was revealed fully, if all the world's mysteries were disclosed and its riddles solved, it would not be magic. Perhaps the only safe thing to be said about magic is that it originates and ends in the inexplicable. Magical skills, magical practices, magical beliefs and tales of magic all derive from or lead to puzzling questions: did that really happen? Where do we come from? Is there life after death? Do I believe that story? Magic poses questions and challenges preconceptions. Since its sphere of action is the unknown, inevitably magic creates conflicts. Although opinions differ, people continue to ask these questions and tell magical stories. Whether

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[88] Ariel Glücklich, *The End of Magic* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

[89] John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit, 1997), pp. 615-616.

[90] Veronica Hollinger, 'Preface' to *The Political Unconscious of the Fantasy Sub-genre of Romance*, by Patrick R. Burger (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), pp. iii-iv.

or not answers can be found, the act of asking is itself a manifestation of an urge towards the unknown. Who knows what answers may come?

It may be helpful to recollect how this thesis came to focus on magic. For the last thirty years of the twentieth century, countless studies have been produced on the topic of fantasy literature. Tzvetan Todorov's study *The Fantastic* (1970) is often the starting point for discussions of fantasy literature. Todorov's structuralist approach to the 'fantastic' genre, concentrated on specific narrative strategies and structures employed in 'fantastic' narratives, defined as those texts expressing uncertainty and embodying inexplicability: 'In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world'.[91] The feelings of hesitation shared by the reader and sometimes by a character of a 'fantastic' text are crucial in Todorov's definition of the genre. In order for a text to be called 'fantastic', three conditions must be fulfilled:

> First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character. [...] Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (p. 33)

One of the examples Todorov used for his definition of the genre was Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). James does not give any explanation as to whether the ghosts of the story exist or not, and this, according to Todorov, is essentially what makes his text a classic example of the 'fantastic' (p. 43). If there is no uncertainty, nor interpretative tension, then the text belongs to the 'uncanny' or the 'marvellous'. Unlike a 'fantastic' narrative, the inexplicable elements of an 'uncanny' or a 'marvellous' story are justified within the stories. In the 'uncanny', strange, abnormal, irrational situations, characters or events are eventually explained according to 'the laws of reality' (p. 43), and the

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[91] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach* (1970) (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 25. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

mystery is revealed to be the product of a character's mental delusion, hallucination or dream, as in Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (Todorov, pp. 47-48). In a story of the marvellous, on the other hand, the realm of magic is accepted as part of the world of fiction so that the inexplicable elements are justified through the laws of magic acknowledged from the beginning, as in *Arabian Nights*, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5). Todorov's definitions have added enormous weight to the criticism of fantastic fiction, although the terms 'fantasy' and 'fantastic' have since caused problems of definition, often derived from the different usage of the terms in each author's critical work.

About ten years after Todorov's study, Rosemary Jackson criticised some of his approaches. Despite the title of her analysis, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), Jackson's study focused mainly on the fantastic, even though the author did not seem to make a difference between the two terms. As in Todorov's study, Jackson's definition of the genre focuses on uncertainty and the inability to explain a situation through the laws of nature:

> Fantastic narratives confound elements of both the marvellous and the mimetic. They assert that what they are telling is real — relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so — and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what — within those terms — is manifestly unreal. (p. 34)

As in Todorov, the notion of the fantastic is not related to the creation of a parallel world, but it is, in fact, rooted in the real world, whose laws, conventions and preconceptions are dramatically subverted by events which do not find rational justification. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein asserts: 'It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have something – a form – in common with it'.[92] Jackson argues that fantasy or fantastic literature has often wrongly been dismissed as escapist. Far from aiming at the creation of utopian worlds, Jackson stresses that the

[92] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), transl. by D.F. Pears and B.F. MvGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 7.

fantastic holds a much more radical relationship to the present reality from which it originates:

> A fantastic text tells of an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary, as opposed to what already exists and is permitted as 'really' visible. [...] Each fantastic text functions differently, depending upon its particular historical placing, and its different ideological, political and economic determinants, but the most subversive fantasies are those which attempt to transform the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic. (p. 91)

Although Todorov had already suggested the 'transgression' of laws as an implicit aspect of 'fantastic' narratives,[93] Jackson's study focused more on the political issue embodied by fantasy literature. Whether fantasy might be the expression of reactionary or revolutionary political views, such texts have to be read bearing in mind their political message. Furthermore, Jackson criticises Todorov's dismissal of psychoanalytical theories to explain the fantastic. Conversely, Jackson emphasises the relevance of psychological readings of fantastic texts and the influence of psychoanalysis for the understanding of the stories. The subversive function of fantasy literature is channelled through its disintegration of the conventions of reality and, Jackson argues, specifically through the fragmentation of the human psyche: 'fantasies of deconstructed, demolished or divided identities and disintegrated bodies, oppose traditional categories of unitary selves' (pp. 177-78). Fantastic texts stretch the boundaries of interpretation, as both reader and characters are lost within the labyrinths of interpretations, conflicting versions of the truth and unsolvable riddles. Inevitably, these texts deconstruct the existence of absolute truths at any level and everything becomes relative. From social roles to gender issues, from narrative theory to language analysis, the primary function of fantastic texts is that of challenging set boundaries and questioning the validity of fixed identities and absolute categories.

Two important points derive from this brief sketch of Todorov's and Jackson's studies. First of all, the fantastic is closely related to the 'real' world.

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[93] See Todorov, pp. 162-167.

Rather than envisaging the existence of bizarre parallel worlds inhabited by quirky creatures and ruled by supernatural laws, the fantastic derives and takes place in a world the readers recognise as their own. Secondly, as a consequence of the first point, since it belongs to a recognisable world, the fantastic will have dramatic consequences on the readers' beliefs, deconstructing any preconceptions and challenging alternative perspectives and ways of thinking. The fantastic, then, stems from this marriage between 'reality' and fantasy, as emphasised by T. E. Apter, whose study is significantly entitled *Fantasy Literature. An Approach to Reality* (1982). In his words:

> The impact of fantasy rests upon the fact that the world presented seems to be unquestionably ours, yet at the same time, as in a dream, ordinary meanings are suspended. Everything proliferates with potential meanings and becomes a potential danger. Even when a mistake is seen to be made, the fear is not mitigated. The ideas, objects and situations remain hedged round with baffling associations. All reassurance or reprieve is illusory in face of the anxiety arising from the knowledge that the familiar can take on, and tends to take on, strange or threatening forms.[94]

Apter's discussion of the 'familiar' is based on Sigmund Freud's study 'The Uncanny' (1919), a pivotal text in the development of the debate on fantasy genres throughout the twentieth century. The closeness of the uncanny with the familiar is crucial, as remarked by Freud: 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression'.[95] Crucially, the uncanny coexists with the familiar, and this highlights the sinister ambiguity embodied by the concept of the uncanny, that it belongs to the familiar is what makes it a threatening concept. The two are inseparable as 'all serious fantasy is deeply rooted in human experience and is relevant to human living', as Ann Swinfen stated in her *Defence of Fantasy* (1984).[96] Fantasy

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[94] T. E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature. An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 2-3.

[95] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17, pp. 217-252 (p. 241).

[96] Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy. A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) p. 231.

adopts 'imaginative, subconscious, visionary' experiences in place of rational cognitive approaches to reality. Fantasy, therefore, provides alternative answers to ontological and epistemological questions, through which reality assumes a much more complex, layered representation.

Although Jackson, Apter and Swinfen all share a common theoretical ground, seemingly derived from their reading of Freud and Todorov, it is regrettable that literary theory does not appear to make a clear distinction between (general) fantasy and the specific fantastic since Todorov's study. For the purpose of this thesis, the lack of consistent specificity – as far as definitions of fantasy and the fantastic are concerned – in genre theory is aggravated by the fact that the analysed texts present a variety of genres and, sometimes, mixture of realistic and non-realistic feature in the same narrative. Thus, Elphinstone's *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* could have been ascribed to science fiction, whereas Tennant's *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* and Thompson's *Justine* could be designated 'gothic' narratives. Moreover, several of the texts analysed in this thesis feature a fragmented genre-structure, embodying realistic and fantastic elements in the same narratives, as will be seen in Fell's *The Bad Box*, Hayton's *The Governors* and Smith's *Hotel World*.

The coexistence of different genres was behind the decision to investigate other non-realistic genre definitions and theories, to try and find a better and more consistent definition applicable to the studied texts. First, I explored the links between magic realism and the fantastic, to discover that the relationship between the two genres is complex and raises further problems of definition. Amaryll Chanady's *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985) defined the two genres comparatively. In particular, Chanady focused on the different role played by the supernatural in each: 'in magical realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic. [...] In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two

modes'.[97] The integration of magic and reality of magic realism fits the discussion of the works selected for this thesis, as the immanent quality of magic is a fundamental starting point. Nonetheless, the non-problematic nature of magic in the context of magic realism raises some questions, since, as far as this thesis is concerned, it would be implausible to assume that magic is unproblematic. In fact, as we have noted, magic is the primary source of conflict at various levels. Magic questions preconceptions, beliefs, identities, and challenges the boundaries of gender, genre, language and ultimately, interpretation.

Similar questions arise if we consider Romance as a starting point for genre definition for studied texts. As influential as Todorov's study on the fantastic, Northrop Frye's extensive study on genre concentrates on Romance in the third essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) 'The Mythos of Summer: Romance' and in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (1976). In the most recent of the two works, Frye argues that a direct 'evolutionary' line, that of 'sentimental romance', links the romance genre from its Classical manifestations (Heliodorus, Apuleius, etc.) through Medieval romances, Gothic novel, Fantasy and finally Science Fiction.[98] Frye's theory is central to more recent studies of romance, including one by Patrick R. Burger, who argues that fantasy is not a genre, but a sub-genre of romance, for 'romance as a modern genre includes such seemingly diverse literary forms as science-fiction, westerns, romances (i.e. Harlequin romances), crime thrillers, horror and fantasy'.[99] Such continuity within the genre of romance is applicable to all those fantasy genres – or romance sub-genres as Burger wants it – where distinctive characteristics derived from Classical romance are manifested. All aspects of romance conform to its dialectic structure, in which there are clear oppositions between characters, settings and what these stand for.

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[97] Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (London: Garland Publishing, 1985), pp. 23-24.

[98] See Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 3-5.

[99] Patrick R. Burger, *The Political Unconscious of the Fantasy Sub-genre of Romance* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), p. 3.

Furthermore, as Frye argues, in order for such binary oppositions to be enforced, 'the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended'.[100] In particular, when discussing the role of the hero, Frye notices how supernatural occurrences are 'accepted' as part of the world of romance: 'prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established' (Frye 1957, p. 33). The absence of ambiguity and tension between the 'real' world and the hero's world imply that, unlike fantastic texts, there are no feelings of hesitation in the reading of a romance. On the other hand, in the chosen texts, it is the ambiguity of magic, which causes interpretative tensions, readers' hesitations and characters' dilemmas.

If we look at recent criticism focussing in Scottish fantasy, notions of continuity within non-realistic in Scotland find large critical consensus, as scholars seem to agree on the manifest persistence of supernatural elements throughout Scottish literature. As summarised by Colin Manlove: 'It is much easier to speak of Scottish than of English fantasy, in the immediate sense that Scotland has a large and even now still faintly lingering folk and fairy tale tradition'.[101] Manlove suggested that such 'continuity' works at two levels: the continuity of the supernatural tradition throughout Scottish literature and the continuity between the supernatural world and the real world throughout this tradition. From this starting point, Elphinstone challenged Manlove's theories and highlights the subversive bond between 'fantasy' and 'reality':

> [Gregory] Smith and Manlove both draw attention to the way that Scottish fantasy locates the supernatural in the heart of contemporary realism. The implication is that fantasy subverts the assumptions of that world. I think it does more: in a poststructuralist world, it destabilises contemporary notions of what is 'real', drawing upon past traditions, dreams, subconscious hopes and fears about the supernatural and giving them a validity which is at least equal to, and often stronger than, the rational laws that supposedly govern the external world. [102]

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[100] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) p. 33. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[101] Manlove 1994, p. 1.

[102] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Scottish Fantasy Today', *Ecloga*, 1 (2000-1), 15-25 (p. 16).

Elphinstone defines the supernatural in literature as a subversive force. Non-rational ways of looking at the world are as valid tools of knowledge as rational approaches. The imagination's strategies in the shape of dreams, apparitions, hallucinations and other non-rational forms of intuition constitute valid alternative epistemological instruments.

Manlove and Elphinstone argued – like Todorov, Jackson and Apter – that there is continuity between 'fantasy' and 'reality'. However, the term 'fantasy' seems to be used both to indicate a literary genre or, as the case may be, several sub-genres, as well as the human faculty to imagine. Fantasy comes from the Greek 'φανειν' (fanein), to represent. The old Greek word 'φαντασία' (fantasia) therefore means 'appearing', but also 'image' and 'imagination'.[103] Fantasy is originally (and perhaps ultimately) any imaginative representation, a projection of the human imagination. The crucial role played by imagination suggests a comparison between 'fantasy' and 'mimesis'. As argued by Eric Auerbach in his influential study of the genre,[104] 'mimesis' is the literature of 'imitation' or 'representation'. The main difference between 'imitation' and 'imagination' is that the latter, arguably, is less constricted by canons or rules. While 'imitation' suggests the idea of close reproduction of 'reality', 'imaginative representation' can be a freer interpretation of the same subject.

Two questions arise from this general difference between 'imitation' and 'imagination'. On one hand, it can certainly be argued that a realistic narrative is still the product of the subjective imagination and therefore can never correspond to such a thing as 'reality'. On the other, the supernatural can still be part of realistic narrative. However, in the context of mimesis, when magic is introduced in a realistic narrative (see for example Auerbach's analysis of Homer's poems and the Bible), it is to reproduce something that, according to the author of each text, belongs to 'reality'. In fantasy, instead, the core of the

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[103] See Henry George Liddel and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 1915.

[104] See Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), transl. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

narrative is in those elements, which convey distance from 'reality'. Fantasy, therefore, does not present itself as 'imitation' of 'reality', but it is in fact a product of the imagination. In the broadest sense every form of imaginative writing is at least partly 'fantasy', or – as Frye would argue – 'romance'. It is the thread which has run through the millennia of human civilisation. From pre-Christian myths to medieval romances, from the nineteenth-century ghost story to twentieth-century science fiction: 'fantasy' is the omniscient term applicable to all imaginative genres.

Todorov's definition of the fantastic departed from the etymological meaning of 'fantasy'. To Todorov, the fantastic is identified through specific structures and strategies that cause feelings of hesitation in both readers and characters. The fantastic is characterised primarily by the presence of oscillating interpretations and uncertain endings. A fantastic narrative might occur in any genre, provided that no solution is given to those elements that cannot be accepted rationally and empirically. While Todorov defines three specific categories of 'uncanny' (supernatural explained), 'marvellous' (supernatural accepted) and 'fantastic' (supernatural unexplained), he also admits that these genre boundaries can be blurred. Narratives can be halfway between the fantastic and the other two genres and be ascribed to 'fantastic-marvellous' and 'fantastic-uncanny' types of narrative. This seems to be the case for most of the texts dealt with in this thesis. Tennant's *The Bad Sister* is a fantastic text in that the events which take place in the story could be read in a supernatural or psychological context. On the other hand, in *Two Women of London* the mysteries are solved and therefore Tennant's rewriting of Stevenson's novella is not a 'fantastic' novel. Magic is, to a degree accepted, as part of the characters' world of Elphinstone's *A Sparrow's Flight*, Hayton's *Trilogy* and Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput*, but these narratives are rich and complex and not to be dismissed as 'marvellous' fiction.

Subsequent to Todorov, literary theorists have not been consistently distinguishing between fantasy and the fantastic, but the debate about fantasy and the fantastic has been so lively in the last twenty years that it is impossible

to summarise comprehensively or to select a single definition of the term. Suffice to say that for the purpose of this thesis, Todorov's definitions constitute the point of departure. However, I have chosen to use the term 'Magic' as a working definition for the studied texts to highlight distance from general 'fantasy' and, at the same time, to reinforce the seamless continuity between the seen and the unseen evoked by the word 'magic'. In the texts, magic is identified through its three narrative strategies and four groups of tropes delineated above. From the Late Greek 'μαγίκη' (magike), originally magic means 'art'. Magic is art, a human product, and though mysterious, it is nonetheless rooted in the human world. In its ambivalence, magic incarnates the coalescence of the seen and unseen, the paradox of the unexplained enigma embodied in the human, real, palpable world. Nigerian novelist Ben Okri speaks of this in direct, lucid, unambiguous terms, in his poem 'An African Elegy':

> I too have heard the dead singing.
>
> And they tell me that
> This life is good
> They tell me to live it gently
> With fire and always with hope.
> There is wonder here
>
> And there is surprise
> in everything the unseen moves [105]

[105] Ben Okri, 'An African Elegy', in *An African Elegy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p.41.

Chapter Two

Crossing the Boundaries:
Margaret Elphinstone's
Ghostly Dystopias and Magic Otherworlds

Ah but the earth, this grassy land, has changed.
These pitted marks I long to think are rainsdrops
More properly interpreted as sea-spray:
No fossil bones or plants remain to help us
But – carcasses and all organic debris
Devoured by scavengers and scouring tides –
It was a coast, the glaring salty shore
Where bushy banks run now and the rowans sway.

(Christopher Salvesen, from 'History of Stratchclyde')

Crossing Boundaries: Margaret Elphinstone's Ghostly dystopias and Magic Otherworlds

From Naomi's surreal journeys to the community of Clachanpluck and through the wastelands of the Empty Lands in *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, to Gudrid's adventure in *The Sea Road*, voyages are paramount throughout Elphinstone's fiction. Her characters are either wanderers or 'incomers'.[1] The settings of the journeys are often interwoven with mystery, stressing the questioning nature of the voyages. As they cross the boundaries of known territories, these quests may conclude, not in fulfilment or achieving a goal, but rather in the production of a question which reinstates the inexplicable, the magical, the variable and provisional. Elphinstone's fascination with the journey is linked to the trope of the ghost. As seen in the introduction, ghosts are metaphors for the unknown and the liminal zone, which lies *between* boundaries. The conjunction of the two tropes in Elphinstone's fiction is demonstrated by the focus on boundaries, which characters need to deal with. The nature of these boundaries is diverse and so are the areas they define: gender, politics, existence, and knowledge. Elphinstone's stories investigate gender roles, political and social issues (including environmental policy), the reliability of past, beliefs in the Otherworld. The mystery of the unknown, constantly forcing characters and readers to challenge their own beliefs and certainties, is a manifestation of the subversive function magic. In Elphinstone's fiction, it is magic that challenges boundaries, as the mystery embedded in the characters' worlds inevitably compels them to question.

Such challenges are facilitated and reinforced by Elphinstone's transtextual strategies, variously employed throughout her fiction. In varying

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[1] See Alan McGillivray, 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', *Laverock*, 1 (1995), 29-38.

degrees, from short quotations to extensive rewritings, her texts always reveal a desire to establish links between other texts and her own. This is why her theories about the relationship between ballad tradition and Scottish fantasy are useful to understand her own fiction. Her identification of four elements derived from the ballad tradition and still strongly persistent in twentieth century fantasy writing ('importance of placing', 'historicity of the other world', 'influence of ballad and folk tradition' and 'the dangerous woman')[2] reinforces the notion of continuity behind such a connection. As well as continuity, the concept of liminality is crucial in her post-structuralist reading of Scottish fantasy tradition:

> My reading of Scottish fantasy suggests to me not so much a binary opposition (real/fantastic) as a demolishing of the boundary that divides the real from the supernatural. Therefore, I still have to take issue with the notion of anti-syzygy. In this re-location, the borderlands become central, the liminal place where action takes place, and, in the text, where the plot can start to happen. [3]

As her reading of Scottish fantasy tradition challenges Gregory Smith's model of binary dichotomies – the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' –, Elphinstone suggests that the stress is not on the boundaries between real and supernatural, but, in fact, in the intermediate borderline area. Moreover, she suggests that a less 'ordered' structure is also reflected in Scottish literature dealing with the supernatural. Rather than a balanced set of oppositions, to her the Scottish supernatural manifests 'a more anarchic and less hierarchical pluralism'.[4] Elphinstone's reading of the Scottish supernatural as resistant to the 'ordered' opposition of binary categories of thinking reveals the influence of Derridean theories of deconstruction on her theoretical and fictional work.[5]

Elphinstone's theories about Scottish fantasy disclose the theoretical background to her fictional work. Her references to precedent texts reveal the

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[2] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition', in *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings From Scotland*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992), pp. 45-59 (p. 46-47).

[3] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Scottish Fantasy Today', *Ecloga*, 1 (2000-2001), 15-25 (p.16).

[4] Elphinstone 2000-1, p. 15.

[5] See Margaret Elphinstone, 'The Quest: Two Contemporary Adventures', in Gendering The Nation. Studies in Modern Scottish Literature, ed. by Christopher Whyte, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp.107-136 (p.107).

intent to build her texts from her own readings of folk tales, saga, and the literary canon. Such transtextual efforts have an impact on the questions that magic raises in her texts. Past references reinforce these questions, adding complexity and a more universal depth to her stories. Whatever the age in which the stories are set, references to past texts establish ambivalent discourses, and magical events and characters become representatives simultaneously of past and present. In the collection of short stories *An Apple from a Tree*, for example, the magical Green Man ('The Green Man') and Nosila ('An Apple from a Tree') belong to a timeless Otherworld and yet interact with human beings, challenging their preconceptions, rationality and social conventions. Similarly, in the first two novels, *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, the mystery about the past and the fears derived from the 'change' become vehicles for a critical discussion of modern environmental issues.

Elphinstone's earlier novels *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* are set in an unknown world where, after a catastrophic event referred to as the 'change', communities have reverted to a pre-modern way of life. Through these lands, Naomi's journeys are rich with magical elements (supernatural episodes, legends, magical transformations). *The Incomer* is built around three sources of mystery: the unknown past, the forest and 'the incomer'. Time, space and relationships between characters all contribute to the building of mystery in the novel. Although these elements are normally at the core of any narrative, Elphinstone's specific emphasis on the unknown time ellipsis, the forest's metaphysical dimension, and the incomer's uncanny aura all endorse the questioning drive of the narrative.

Virtually nothing is known about the past and characters do not seem to have a clear notion of the nature of the 'change'. Lack of knowledge creates a sense of curiosity and fear, as the change remains an undisclosed mystery. Towards the beginning of the novel, Bridget, one of the women from the community of Clachanpluck, is puzzled by missing words in a book of poetry. The theme of the poem is time. The book is, in her words, 'about what

everybody knows, but the words are put together very differently, like music'.[6] The texts are excerpts from T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' (1935), and these transtextual allusions to the *Four Quartets* express Elphinstone's intention to explore the problematic relationship of the Clachanpluck community with the enigma of their time:

> Time past and time future
> Allow but a little consciousness.
> To be conscious is not to be in time
> But only in time can the moment in the...
>
> [...]
>
> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present...
>
> [...]
>
> All time is unredeemable. (pp. 58-59)[7]

The quotations from Eliot's poem are fragmented and left enigmatically suspended, open to interpretation. Is the punctuation indicating that the stanzas are all that remain from the original poem? Or has Bridget selected the passages she found more meaningful? Either way, the quotations enhance the mystery that pervades the characters' epistemological and ontological concerns about time and existence. Is it possible to know what time means? What happened in the past? The questions remain unanswered but the possibility is implied that characters have started their own process of critical interpretation of tradition. Questions about the past are signalled also by the 'absolute orality' of the community. In the society described in *The Incomer*, texts are perceived with a mixture of interest and fear. There is a challenge to know more about the past but also a reluctance to be challenged by these discoveries. The imaginary society is almost entirely textless. Deprived of books, the anxious urge to

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[6] Margaret Elphinstone, *The Incomer* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), p. 58. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[7] The passages are quoting T. S. Eliot's first Quartet, 'Burnt Norton'. See T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

investigate the past is balanced against a fear that books might be bearers of unpleasant truths or obscure ideas. Texts are regarded as magical tools for the discovery of a different world, memories that do not seem to bear any resemblance to the time of the story.

The ontological discourse on the past and the enigmatic 'change' establishes a link with the forest, the spatial mystery in the novel. The Biblical tones of the openings in chapter two and chapter nineteen echo the first two verses of the *Gospel of St. John* and emphasise the metaphysical questions encrypted in the forest:

> In the beginning there was the forest. The forest covered all the land, and the land became alive with the creatures of the forest. Everything that lived was part of the forest, and each being knew that the forest was not complete without every one of them. (p. 8)[8]

> In the beginning was the land. The land was sufficient to itself, and flourished through timeless years in the strength of its own dream. The land nourished itself, drawing water down from the sky and day, and to the dark by night, and knew itself in the light and in the darkness. (p. 148)

The transtextual allusions to the Bible add a mythical tone to the heavenly descriptions of the forest and the land, while sinisterly anticipating the inevitable demise. The clearing of the forest sets the conflict between the forest people and the 'clearing agents'. The implication is that the 'forest people' are some kind of supernatural beings or native spirits, which naturally belong to the forest environment and protect it against the 'clearing agents'. These outsiders intervene in the natural environment in a way that suggests human impact on nature. The different font used in the quoted passages suggests their independence from the main narrative, as the paratextual strategy emphasises a differentiation from the main text. Whether legends or secondary narratives, they emphasise that the forest is a magical place.

The passages signal the introduction of another issue, one connected to Elphinstone's environmental agenda. The drastic changes occurred in the forest

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[8] Compare with King James Bible, St. John, 1:1,2: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God'.

are indications of the ecological issues which engage Elphinstone's early novels. As Emily tries to explain to Naomi, the cause of what has happened to the forest is 'only people' (p. 114), who have built houses and cleared the forest's natural greenery. The ecological agenda, however, retains the metaphysical significance of the forest, which represents the unknown, an enigma for the community of Clachanpluck, a secret that everybody shares but nobody can grasp. Such metaphysical interpretation of the forest is strengthened by the implication that the forest represents the origin of knowledge, as stressed by one of Emily's visits to the magical green space:

> A place of knowledge, for the place where consciousness is brought to birth is in the dark. The woman who had come so far in order to understand curled herself up like a small animal in the shelter of the rounded rock, her arms folded across her chest, and her left hand clutching the stone which she wore on a chain round her neck. She closed her eyes, and opened her mind to such dreams as the earth might offer. (p. 118)

The knowledge symbolised by the forest is an ambiguous power and can be destructive, casting more epistemological doubts about knowledge and the possibility of knowing. Symbolically, the forest is the setting for the community's major crisis, as it becomes haunted from the moment a rape takes place in the village. The curse, cast upon the community, is symptomatically visualised as a sinister cloud hanging over the forest:

> The nightmare thing hovered and spread, extinguishing the southern sky. There was no wind, only creeping time would disperse it like slow poison smothering the land. It billowed out over the forest, ponderous as nightmare. It touched the furthest trees, and there was no light in the forest, only a greyness that belonged to neither light nor dark. Neither the hope of birth nor the promise of death, only annihilation, and fixity. (p. 219)

The visualisation of the curse manifests the intrusion of 'magic' through the surreal twist in the narrative. The imagery of the passage suggests a supernatural reading of the terrible trauma suffered by the community. The rape assumes a universal meaning: it is not reduced to one individual's offence towards another, but widened to a curse cast on the community as a whole. In

the passage, the representation of 'the nightmare', as the rape episode is referred to, emphasises the impending threat and the community's inability to react against it or articulate what has happened.

In his study on the reciprocal influences between African myth and literature, Wole Soyinka stressed the progressive detachment of western man from his gods. As a result of this recession of a mythic dimension in materialist Western culture, questions about the universe cease to be part of the material world and are relegated to a separate realm of fantasy. Consequently, the mystery of the other world inevitably haunts modern man with its inexplicable laws and unjustified events:

> The ultimate consequence of this — in terms of man's cosmic condition — is that the cosmos receded further and further until, while retaining some of the grandeur of the infinite, it loses the essence of the tangible, the immediate, the appeaseable. It moves from that which can be tangibly metamorphosed into realms of the fantasised; commencing *somewhere else*, where formerly it began, co-existed with, and was completed within the reality of man's physical being and environment. [9]

Although there is no direct citation of Soyinka in Elphinstone's work, the predicament he describes seems to have close affinities with that which Elphinstone depicts. The reference to death in Elphinstone's passage underlines the loss of the positive magic that the forest has represented until the rape has taken place, and the curse is cleared only after two highly ritualised episodes, which significantly take place in the forest. First, the death of the rapist Patrick (which may have been suicide or sacrificial execution) takes place in the forest. The episode is ambiguous and open to interpretation, as the author, perhaps to intensify the sense of mystery in the narrative, plays with the possibilities of Patrick's suicide as a result of his guilt, or an execution performed by unknown justice-makers:

> It was not a sound that he heard, merely coming closer. The shadow was very near to him now. The movement was not so much a thing

[9] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 4.

> heard as a vibration that ran through the earth beneath him. It was too dark to see. But he was conscious of eyes holding him, drawing in. [...] They were very near. So near, if he stretched out his hand he might touch them. Perhaps he could feel their breathing, a rhythmic pulsation very close to him, enclosing him. There was no escaping from them now. No possibility of flight. He could not move at all. The inevitable steadied him. He stood upright, accepting at last. (p. 170)

The passage, which takes place just before Patrick's death, leaves room for a number of possibilities: on one hand, the earlier insight into Patrick's consciousness has made it clear that he has realised the awfulness of his action. On the other, the possibility that there might be people from the community ready to execute him could also be a plausible explanation of what would otherwise be a figment of his paranoid imagination. The unknown element in Patrick's death is another manifestation of Elphinstone's will to leave the reader's imagination alert, and as she deliberately leaves the two possibilities open, she reinforces the sense of mystery attributed to the forest as a magical place.

The second ritualised episode reveals that the forest can regain its positive magic, and be again a place of knowledge and inspiration. It is in the forest that Emily's daughter, Fiona, experiences an epiphanic moment of awareness, as she realises that she is in control of her existence, as the newly designated leader of her community: 'This is my land, and I will create a world where this thing shall not be' (p. 221). The metaphysical concerns of the first part of the novel seem partly solved as the forest signifies not only death, but also rebirth. The forest is indeed the spatial context for each of these events to take place, as it is underlined by the circular structure of the novel. Towards the beginning of the story, Fiona and her friend Anna find themselves in a cave in the middle of the forest:

> The darkness of the cave was quite opaque, giving away not the vestige of a shape or presence, or of anything substantial within at all. But it was not alien. It was like looking into a mirror, except that mirrors only reflect the light. Perhaps the opposite of a mirror, thought Fiona, whatever that may be. Mirrors make everything back to front, so perhaps the opposite is just the way I have been all the time. (p. 41)

The intriguing imagery of the passage is a further example of how the forest becomes a place of wonder in two ways: it is a place of mystery, the location of the uncanny, but also a place of self-discovery, where a new experience can give new meaning to a whole existence. Although a sense of mystery still lingers over the community of Clachanpluck, the possibility seems implied that characters will be able to deal with their ontological questions and positively embrace the unknown future.

The last quotation introduces also an issue about gender in the narrative of *The Incomer*. Lucie Armitt argues that the episode quoted above portrays a lesbian encounter between the two teenagers, representing one of the examples of a 'palimpsestic undercurrent of lesbianism' present in the novel.[10] This possibility could be accepted if viewed in the context of self-awareness that represents the central issue of the episode. Whether or not a sexual encounter happens, the emphasis is on Fiona's reflections upon her existence. The mirror imagery, in particular, emphasises this moment of self-questioning.

More questions of gender are raised by the third motif of mystery, 'the incomer' herself. As the title suggests, Naomi's arrival is the crucial event at the beginning of *The Incomer*. It is symptomatic that the community's diffidence is articulated through the suspicions that Naomi may have bewitching powers. Her music, evocative of a mysterious past assumes almost supernatural connotations:

> The shadows on the wall flickered with a flame that needed trimming. The fantastic weaving shadow played on, long shadow hands with long inhuman fingers flicking up and down over invisible strings, and the small straight shadow never turned its head. (p. 66)

The perception of a demonic quality in Naomi's fiddle discloses the community's attitude towards the stranger. Her looks, also, place Naomi among unknown, supernatural, creatures. 'She looked like the flames themselves, dressed all in red and gold and yellow, her clothes bound together with silver thread that

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[10] Lucie Armitt, 'Space, time and female genealogies: A Kristevan reading of feminist science fiction', in *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 51-61 (p. 57).

glinted in the lamplight. There was something in her red hair that glittered too and her eyes were bright as stars' (p. 100). Naomi's strong charisma exercises a powerful attraction on many of the characters in the novel, and her affair with Davie is the most manifest representation of the community's fascination with the Other. From Naomi's point of view, however, the union is interpreted in a metaphysical framework: 'Another person's body, a man's body, was like remembering something out of another world [...]. The colour of skin seemed magical, after endless hues of forest and winter' (p. 127). The centrality of this episode, placed almost exactly halfway through the story (the description takes place in the fifteenth chapter out of the novel's thirty two), emphasises its relevance and reinforces its metaphysical content. Physical intimacy is experienced as a metaphysical review of existence, as sexuality becomes another form of communication, of contact, and ultimately knowledge.

Gender stereotypes and conventions are challenged by Naomi's desire for freedom and independence. Having had a child with a former partner, Naomi's indifference to motherhood raises questions about gender perceptions and roles in the imaginary communities. Judith Butler's theories against gender categorisation, as suggested in the introduction of this thesis, are extremely relevant to the trope of the witch, the dangerous woman who voices and enacts subversion of gender binary structures. Motherhood does not fit in with Naomi's experience of her female self. The insignificance of the maternal bond signals a view of gender that goes against patriarchal convention and perhaps challenges the existence of gender as an identifying category. Similarly, Naomi's affair with Dave and simultaneously the suggested possibility of a lesbian relationship with Emily raises further questions about gender stability. Catalysed by Naomi's magical aura and charismatic power, gender instability reflects ontological questions about existence in the new world. Significantly, after her encounter with Naomi, Emily's escape to the forest does not give her any counsel, nor does it soothe her angst:

> I have never before found fear in the heart of the forest. Is it something she radiated on to me, this sister of mine? Has she forced me into separation? I have been thrown out of my world into a

> nightmare of another time, I have been burned, consumed and destroyed. (p. 120)

Emily's crisis embraces language and gender issues, and both are closely related to the narrative's ontological and epistemological core. The struggle to comprehend reality and the sexes' inability to communicate run parallel throughout *The Incomer*. More specifically, after the rape episode, the community of Clachanpluck is fragmented. Men and women are traumatically divided by an event that has cast a dark shadow on the relationship between genders. The fracture in the community is epitomised by the inability of members of the opposite sex to communicate with each other. As George says to Naomi: 'We don't seem to speak the same language, do we?' (p. 174). While the community is dealing with the friction caused by the internal division, Naomi is an outsider again, deliberately cut off from any form of communication happening in the village: 'If there were only someone who spoke in a language I could understand' (p. 166). Even more drastic is the linguistic crisis and isolation experienced by Anna, the victim of the rape. Language, for her, loses any coherence and meaning: 'a whole world disintegrating, all a monstrous lie. Words that meant nothing. Meaningless because not human' (p. 155).

Although communication is partly restored towards the end of the novel, the reader of *The Incomer* has been alerted to the ambiguously fragile balance involved in any communication, and becomes sensitised to the weaknesses of language. As in Ali Smith's *Like* and *Hotel World*, both analysed in Chapter Five, Elphinstone poses questions about language. Both authors seem concerned as to how far language is able to express ideas, and whether it has become an increasingly inadequate tool for communication. As in Smith's fiction, these questions remain open in *The Incomer* but return, constantly, throughout Elphinstone's fiction. In all her works, the universality of language remains a recurring question. It may help to explain certain things, but remains in itself inexplicable.

Elphinstone's second novel, *A Sparrow's Flight*, is more complex. It introduces imagery from popular traditions and creates thematic and transtextual links with several legends, including *Parsifal* and *The Holy Grail*, and related texts such as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1913-15), Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).

The mystery focuses on Thomas, Naomi's travelling companion, and the 'Empty Lands', his community. References to the past hint that the 'change' has particularly affected Thomas's community, who have lived as outcasts ever since. As Thomas explains:

> Before the world changed [...] these lands were among the most beautiful on earth, and many people prospered here. But in the days of the old world, it was as you say. There were men in this country who pursued power, with no regard for life, or for what was fitting for this world.[11]

Political and environmental issues creep in the narrative, as explanation on the change is attributed to human selfishness and greed for power. Humans have introduced a new mysterious element into the world, which is fatal to the survival of their own species. Although it is not stated in the narrative, some kind of nuclear radiation has contaminated the Empty Lands with serious genetic consequences to its inhabitants:

> There was some kind of explosion [...]. And the walls which had contained the thing were blown apart. It broke loose, and the poison of it spread throughout our land. When my people began to realise what had happened, they fled. But the land was devastated, and the people could not escape fast enough. Many of us became sick, and quickly died. But an element that feeds on life can't be easily eradicated. The people fled, but they took the poison with them, and it lived in their bodies. Which is why we were afraid to have children.
> (p. 86)

As in *The Incomer*, environmental concerns represent the background to Thomas and Naomi's adventure, as Elphinstone's employs the dystopian

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[11] Margaret Elphinstone, *A Sparrow's Flight: A Novel of a Future* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), p. 84. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

setting of the Empty Lands to create a magic narrative. Elphinstone's intention is revealed through her allusions to precedent texts. Thomas's name is evocative of ballad hero Thomas The Rhymer'. In *A Sparrow's Flight* Thomas's journey towards the mysterious Empty Lands acquires a supernatural aura through a possible association to Thomas the Rhymer and the magical journey to 'fair Elfland':

> He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,
> And a pair of shoes of velvet green,
> And till seven years were gane and past
> True Thomas on earth was never seen.[12]

The reference to the *seven* years' gap of Thomas the Rhymer's disappearance is mirrored by Thomas's exile from the Empty Lands and his return after *seven* years, when the magic dance takes place. Furthermore, deceptive magic is at the core of the ballad and makes its ending ironic: after receiving 'the tongue that never lies' (p. 134), as a gift from the Fairy, Thomas the Rhymer's destiny is ambiguously left unknown. In Elphinstone's novel, on the other hand, Thomas *is* the magician. Magic can create suspension of disbelief, transferring people from the realm of reality to the world of dream. As Thomas admits: 'All we produce is dreams' (p. 36). The implication is that reality is too fearful to deal with, and 'if you don't know the truth you invent dragons' (p. 83). Magic is necessary to help people survive the fear of reality. Magic can help exorcise the fear of impending danger and fill in the gaps left open by voids of knowledge. Whereas Thomas the Rhymer travels to Fairyland following and believing his vision of the Fairy Queen, in Elphinstone's novel, Thomas performs magic to exercise control over – and exercise his fear of – reality. Thomas the Rhymer is unaware of the supernatural agent's intention, whereas Thomas's magical skills are a conscious effort to defeat his fear of the unknown. Paradoxically, magic is more reassuring than reality. Although magic

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[12] 'Thomas The Rhymer', in *Scottish Ballads*, ed. by Emily Lyle (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 132-134 (p. 134). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. For different versions of the ballad of 'Thomas The Rhymer' see Thomas Rhymer' in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vol., ed. by F. J. Child (Boston and New York: Houghton, Miffin and Company, 1882-1889), vol. 1, pp. 317-329.

is less deceptive (and fearsome) than reality in *A Sparrow's Flight*, the surreal twists of the narrative consistently question the boundaries between the seen and the unseen. Throughout Naomi and Thomas's journey, magic is a persistent presence, as a body of legends and superstitions pervading the mysterious Empty Lands. Perception of reality is distorted by the powerful presence of magic and causes the boundaries between seen and unseen to become gradually blurred, as the story unfolds. Just before reaching Thomas's community, Naomi imagines the Empty Lands to be populated with fantastic chimeras: 'She thought of men with asses' heads, lions with the heads of women. She had seen no human being in this valley at all, and now there were primroses sprouting the flowers of fantasy, and outlandish plants bearing no relation to anything in the world outside' (p. 95). The climax of the journey, a ritual dance celebrating the time elapsed from the change, is vividly portrayed through magical imagery.[13] Identities are confused; Thomas is able to transform himself repeatedly; metamorphosis and deception permeate the dance thoroughly. Thomas's sudden illness abruptly interrupts the magic of the dance and casts a new shadow of doom upon the village:

> A scream of anguish tore the music apart. The circle broke, disintegrated. The Hanged One pitched forward, falling on the trampled grass. He screamed again. The music shattered into fragments. His third scream filled the whole air with pain. Then he lay silent, unconscious at the feet of the World. (p. 182)

This expressionist passage describing Thomas's stroke in the middle of the ritual dance assumes a deeper meaning within the surreal nature of the episode. The Tarot imagery pervasively used throughout the section confers a plethora of meanings to this particular episode. Elphinstone's choice of specific images from the Tarot suggests links with several myths of death and resurrection. Thomas is 'The Magician', one of the 'major arcana' in the Tarot.

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[13] As Douglas Gifford has observed, the imagery bears strong ties to the medieval Tarot images, strengthening the idea, already discussed earlier, of magic crossing the boundaries of time. See Douglas Gifford, 'Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 604-629.

Often associated with creative power, the magician, though human, is a man who resembles the Maker's ability to give life and transform. 'The Magician', also known as 'The Juggler', represents fertility, the origin of life, bears the number one in the pack and, according to some theorists, 'if the Fool is the Nothing which, so to speak, precedes the Beginning, the Juggler is the Beginning itself'.[14] Just before the ritual dance, Thomas transforms himself into 'The Fool', a character Thomas is related to from the beginning, when Naomi asks him if he is 'a professional fool' (p. 14). In *A Sparrow's Flight* the Fool's mask looks simultaneously backward and forward, as in the traditional Tarot imagery that depicts 'The Fool' as a two-faced creature. 'The Fool' is the emblem of folly and insanity, which can also signify a state beyond the human nature, a sort of ecstasy that can connect man with god.[15]

Significantly, 'The Fool' has also been associated with Parsifal:[16] 'the child whose father is dead and who is brought up by his mother in seclusion, ignorant of the ways of the world.'[17] The lineage connecting 'The Fool' to Parsifal creates a symmetric link between Parsifal and Elphinstone's character. Like Parsifal, Thomas is on a quest. He is virtually fatherless, as nothing is known about his father, while the only consistent element in the tradition relative to Parsifal's lineage is that he is a widow's son.[18] Finally, both heroes appear to have platonic relationships with women, something that, again, relates them both to the bisexual/neutral Fool in the Tarot.[19]

The most fascinating aspect in the comparison between Parsifal and Thomas is the relationship of the former to the Fisher King and, consequently, the Quest for the Holy Grail. According to the majority of the manuscripts

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[14] Richard Cavendish, *The Tarot* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), p. 67.

[15] Folly, as suggested by the reading of St. Paul and others, signifies a higher state of humanity, closer to divinity. For this and other interpretation of 'The Fool' and a general discussion about the Tarot, see Cavendish, pp. 67-70. See also Robert Wang, *An Introduction to the Golden Dawn Tarot* (1996) (Hammersmith: Thorsons, 2001).

[16] For two extensive studies of the legends of Parsifal and the Holy Grail, see: Jessie Weston, *The Legend of Sir Parsifal. Studies in its Origin, Development and Position in the Arthurian Cycle*, 2 vol., (London: David Nutt, 1906) *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (London: G. Bell and Sons LTD, 1913) and *From Ritual To Romance* (1920) (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1957).

[17] Cavendish, p. 66.

[18] See Weston 1906, vol. 1, p. 65.

[19] See Cavendish, p. 70.

responsible for the tradition of the story,[20] Parsifal is a nephew to the Fisher King, who is wounded and whose land has gone to waste as a result of his illness. The King's recovery is linked to the Grail, a mysterious object that changes shape, material and characteristics across the different texts included in the tradition.[21] In 1920 Jessie Weston suggested a 'ritual theory', according to which the Grail legend is not the result of a poet's genius, but the last episode of a long-standing tradition, 'the legendary record of something that really happened'.[22] Weston's theory was influenced by her reading of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Here, the Scottish anthropologist discussed the widespread custom of killing kings across pre-Christian Europe, Africa and Asia. The theory behind the practice lay in the belief that kings had some divine character in them and could not be left to age and die of natural causes because this would have affected the life of the community and the fertility of the land. Similarly, other fertility rituals involved the human sacrifice of young boys or girls chosen to impersonate gods and then killed to ingratiate the gods and ensure the success of the crops.[23] The cult relative to the death and rebirth of a god was behind the origin of several ritual feasts celebrating the resurrection of the god and consequently the regeneration of the land:

> Thus we can understand how the wasting of the land can be connected with, and directly caused by, the death or infirmity, of the King, and how the achievement of the Quest, by restoring to health (and some of the Grail romances specifically state, youth) the personage upon whose vitality the vitality of the land depends, can restore these wastes to verdures.[24]

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[20] See Weston 1906, vol. 1, pp. 57-75.

[21] 'While the talisman is always known as the Grail, the term may connote a mysterious and undescribed Food-providing Object, which comes and goes without visible agency; a stone, endowed with food- and life-giving properties, which also from time to time assumes the role of an oracle; a 'Holy Object', the form of which is not indicated, wrought of gold and precious stones, and emitting a brilliant light; a Reliquary; the Dish from which Our Lord and His Disciples ate the Paschal Lamb at the Last Supper, or the Cup of that Meal; the Vessel (sometimes that just mentioned whether cup or dish, sometimes one specially made for the purpose) in which Joseph of Arimathea received the Blood which flowed from the Wounds of the Redeemer; finally, a mysterious combination of these two latter forms with the Chalice of Eucharist' (Weston 1913, pp. 2-3).

[22] Weston 1913, p. 97.

[23] See Sir James Frazer, 'The Myth of Adonis', *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (1900-1922), (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993), pp. 324-341. See also Soyinka, pp. 1-36.

[24] Weston 1913, p. 81.

The ancient beliefs concerning the death of the king/god, the legend of Parsifal and the Quest for the Holy Grail and the restoration of the land, return crucially in a central text of the Modern Movement, partially influenced by Tarot imagery, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Indeed it is, admittedly, from her reading of Eliot's poem, that Elphinstone borrows the theme of a deserted land, and the use of Tarot imagery.[25] The intertextual allusions merge myth, legend, literary precedents and popular culture in Thomas's quest through his own *Waste Land*, the Empty Lands. Elphinstone's awareness of Eliot's poem is reinforced, before the end of the performance, when Thomas is turned into the Hanged Man, another Tarot image adopted by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, and another reference to 'the theme of dying and rising god as expounded in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, the god whose death and resurrection each year was the guarantee of the annual rebirth of the crops, and by analogy the life after death for men'.[26]

The metaphysical quality of Thomas's performance during the dance is further emphasised by his collapse in front of the dancer who is performing 'The World'. Once again, here the reference to the Tarot is manifest, since 'The World' is usually depicted as a dancing female creature in the traditional pack. Elphinstone has admitted that her choice of Tarot imagery was dictated by her fascination with the ancestral images of the pack:

> I had also become interested in reading about the Tarot. Images like that do not reflect reality, but they are like looking in a mirror: you can make decisions in relation to the image you see, and you can respond to it. I am not into fortune-telling or horoscopes, but I think in all of these there are images which can speak to you. They are ancient images: very colourful and very ritualistic.[27]

In the world of the novel, the images of the Tarot, whose origin is unknown, represent the memory of that remote past, which Elphinstone's characters are concerned with and haunted by. The unknown source and enigmatic meaning of the images reinforce the ontological questions at the core of the narrative.

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[25] See 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.
[26] Cavendish, p. 106.
[27] See 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', appendix.

The ritual dance does not only have a celebratory function, but serves the community to engage in a ritual which links them to that past which they fail to understand and know rationally. The cryptic meaning of these images is comparable to the ambiguity of words. Language, too, is questioned in its ability to perform the task of defining reality. As Naomi remarks: 'What are words if they're not images?'(p. 226). Just like images, words can change their shape, drift away and disappear. This perception about language poses doubts about its ability to represent and explain.

Elphinstone's concern with language, already encountered in her first novel, is followed up with Naomi's intellectual search for the music of the past in *A Sparrow's Flight*. Attracted by the idea of discovering more about the classical music from the past, she follows Thomas with her own quest in mind. Parallel to what has been happening to language, music has also returned to an unwritten state and practising musicians are the sole bearers of musical knowledge. When finally faced with the challenge to decipher the sheet music from the past, Naomi questions her ability to understand and discover more about the past through the written score:

> It didn't matter how difficult it was, or how long it took her. She was beginning to work out the patterns in the unknown music, and they were unprecedented. It was like climbing up the familiar slopes to the ridge she saw from the valley, and seeing the infinite ranges of peaks beyond. They might appear unreachable, but they belonged to the same earth, and all that was required was the patience to walk to them, one step after another. (p. 174)

The solution to the musical riddle hides even more precious discoveries. Understanding the music is the fulfilment of her quest, the end of her journey through the past and its mystery. Naomi's success in interpreting the sheet music from the past is a metaphor for the partially successful epistemological journey undertaken with Thomas. Her magical journey has allowed her to fill in part of the voids between the boundaries, and to give answers to the ontological questions raised throughout the novel.

Unlike the earlier novels, Elphinstone's later novels present specific time-settings. *Islanders* (1995) and *The Sea Road* (2000) are respectively set in the twelfth and eleventh centuries. Introducing a historical framework, *Islanders* and *The Sea Road* also present realistic settings, in the Shetland Islands, Northern Europe (*Islanders*), Italy, Iceland and Green land [sic] (*The Sea Road*).

In *Islanders*, Elphinstone experiments with a different genre from the previous novels. The emphasis given to the historical setting creates the basis for a realistic, historical narrative. The main character, Astrid, daughter of an Irishman who has perished in a shipwreck, is an outsider newly arrived in a community of the Shetland Islands. Unlike Naomi, Astrid does not carry a bewitching and magic aura, and the supernatural is not as relevant for the development of the story in *Islanders* as in the early novels. However, there are a few exceptions. The notion that Astrid is a 'changeling' is the manifestation of one of those beliefs and superstitions still alive at the time of the Shetlanders' conversion to Christianity and which persisted in Scotland to modern times.[28] Afterwards, at the very end of Astrid's journey across Northern Europe, two seals guide Astrid and her husband Thorvald home. Belief in seals or selkies, as seen in the fourth chapter of this thesis, constitutes a large chapter of folk-legends and superstitions particularly important among Celtic countries.[29]

Magic returns more prominently in *The Sea Road*, which shares with *Islanders* a Northern European location and a definite historical time frame. Inspired by the reading of Icelandic sagas, *The Sea Road* is mainly based upon the original saga 'Eirik the Red', where Gudrid features as a minor character. As the author has admitted, the novel gives Gudrid a psychological dimension, which she lacks in the saga.[30] Despite the shift in the narrative point of view, Elphinstone borrows several elements from the Icelandic traditional saga: the main plot, the journeys to Green Land, the episode of the plague and Gudrid's

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[28] See Margaret Bennet, *Scottish Customs From The Cradle to The Grave* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), pp. 23-27. See also F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough* (1957-68), 4 vol. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989), vol. 1, p. 49, p. 76, p. 81, p. 118.

[29] See Gifford 'Contemporary Fiction II'.

[30] See 'interview with Margaret Elphinstone', appendix.

two marriages are all present in the original story. The saga has Gudrid 'unversed in magic' and a firm Christian believer, [31] refusing, despite her natural disposition and Halldis's teachings, to deal with the pagan practices still widespread in Green Land:

> 'I am unversed in magic, neither am I a prophetess,' said Gudrid then, 'but Halldis my fostermother taught me in Iceland the chant which she called Varðlokur.'
> 'Then you are wise in good time,' said Thorbjorg.
> 'This is a kind a proceeding I feel I can play no part in,' said Gudrid, 'for I am a Christian woman.' (pp. 135-136)

In *The Sea Road* Gudrid is also a skilled witch and practises magic even after her conversion to Christianity. Elphinstone's Gudrid is more complex than the character from the original saga. While Elphinstone gives her a rounder psychological identity, the character, it will be seen, also embodies the uncanny ambiguity of magic that permeates *The Sea Road*.

As the title suggests, the novel tells the story of several journeys by sea. At the beginning of her story, the readers are informed of the unusual nature of Gudrid's journeys: 'This woman, apparently, is one of those who have gone beyond the confines of the mortal world, in the body. She has dwelt for over a year in the lands outside the material world. She has talked with demons and the ghosts of the dead'.[32] In the context of a historical narrative, this introduction creates a strong expectation of a story about the supernatural. From the beginning of the narrative, the interpretative tension is signalled by the distance with which the translator expresses his doubts about the truthfulness of such episodes. Most of the supernatural events occur during Gudrid's stay in Green Land, an uncharted territory at the time, a fact that adds to the mysterious nature of the events. *The Sea Road* presents a mixture of pagan and Christian religion as the story takes place in the eleventh century, at a time when Christianity was starting to spread across Northern Europe. Gudrid embodies

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[31] 'Eirik the Red', in *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Gwyn Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 126-157 (p. 135). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[32] Margaret Elphinstone, *The Sea Road* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), p. 3. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the intermediate phase between the two religions, as in her soul coexist both the long-living traditions of pagan practices and the newly acquired Christian beliefs. Her pagan up bringing has made her knowledgeable in sorcery, which she is able and willing to use even after her conversion to Christianity. Her childhood memories evoke the existence of spirits at Snaefel:

> The gods walked up there, and on tempestuous nights, we could hear Thor battle with the demons who live in the heart of the mountain. Snaefel is full of lesser spirits too: goblins, elves, trolls, all kinds of unknown things. I've seen them often, but always from the corner of my eye. If you look straight at any of those folk they change shape at once into twisted lava columns, so you're never quite sure of what you've seen. (p. 19)

The magical episodes at Snaefel question the reliability of the observer, who admits that 'you're never quite sure of what you've seen'. The immanence of pagan religion and the existence of such spirits clash with the transcendent, immaterial and invisible Christian God. The conflict between the two systems of belief and related moral codes, however, makes her a more human character than the stern Gudrid from the saga. In Green Land Gudrid struggles to understand the Christian word preached by Thjodhild, Eirik's wife. Thjodhild's Christianity is felt too distant from Gudrid's own existence: 'I wanted a promise given to my body, not my soul. I wanted nothing more to do with the things that are not visible. I wanted the love that is of this world' (p. 83). Earthly needs and the knowledge of spells do not stop Gudrid from believing that there is something beyond the world of visible things.

Borrowed from the original saga,[33] the events that occur in Green Land after the outbreak of a fatal disease, which claims the life of Gudrid's husband, are described in a lengthy third person-passage with a surrealist twist (pp. 128-133). The crucial narrative section signals the intrusion of magic in the historical narrative. The inexplicable magic of the event challenges rational explanations of the surreal episode: as those living begin to resemble the dead, conversely,

[33] Compare with *Eirik the Red...*, pp. 142-43.

the ghosts of the recently deceased appear humanised. In this paradoxical liminal situation boundaries between life and death are temporarily suspended:

> The ghosts are watching over the lands of Thorstein the Black, because every night new souls are added to their number. The sickness sweeps through the settlement, and each time a person dies its soul is torn from its body and drawn into the throng. Some are helped on their way with tears and blessings, a few have the mark of a cross made over them, and all are sent with the protection of charms and offerings. But in the dark space under the rafters all these things fade into the same mist, which drifts clear for a moment to let the new soul in, then thickens. (p. 128)

Christian practices and pagan beliefs, reality and dream coexist in Gudrid's sinister experience in Green Land. Even after the outbreak, ghosts persistently intrude Gudrid's story. Haunted by the ghosts for over a year she and Thorstein the Black are confined to his house, controlled by the spirits of the dead. Even after her departure from Green Land, only after a long time, when she meets Karlsefni, do the ghostly visions stop haunting Gudrid as he persuades her to acknowledge the deaths and let the spirits go:

> The ghosts look down through the grey rain they can no longer feel. Then they drift inland, and now there is no green, only the eternal unforgiving ice [...]. The ghosts can never go back down among the houses. There's no hearth fire for them. Caught between the love that binds them to life and the promise of a brilliance that they cannot feel, they vanish into the empty North, lost in the freezing light. (p. 162)

Gudrid's story ends in Bracciano, near Rome, when Agnar bids good-bye to her before her last journey to Iceland. The tension between magical elements and realistic narrative operate their most subversive function on the first narrative level, the story of Agnar and Gudrid; even after her departure, a veil of ambiguity is cast over Agnar's beliefs:

> 'If I don't see you before, we'll meet in Iceland.' Why did she say that? Does she know? Was it a figure of speech, or simply a blind wish? She looked so fragile, surrounded by her escort. Will she see Iceland again? Will I? Suddenly my world is full of questions, in a way that it hasn't been since I read the forbidden works of the Infidel, out of the locked cabinet in the library at Reims. (pp. 241-2)

It is symptomatic that, after his encounter with Gudrid and having listened to he tales, Agnar's 'world is full of questions'. Agnar's dogmatic attitude has crumbled, his monolithic knowledge cracked, his position destabilised. The coexistence of two worlds and systems of belief, pagan and Christian, brought together by Gudrid's journeys, have plunged Agnar into the liminal black hole, the domain of uncertainty, the realm of doubt. As in the relationship between the monks and the giant's daughters in Hayton's *Trilogy*, the breaking of epistemological and ontological strongholds, however, is not entirely negative. Having started his relationship with Gudrid in order to find answers to his questions, after six months (Gudrid begins the tale of her adventures on July 5th 1051; Agnar's postscriptum is dated December 22nd 1051) Agnar is, at last, beginning to question. The conflict, epitomised by Gudrid's journey to uncharted territories, is ultimately the result of the epistemological and metaphysical challenges raised by the intrusion of magic in the historical narrative. It is the inexplicable immanence of magic in the 'real' world, which accentuates its subversive power over rational thinking.

More challenges to rational thinking arise from the use of language in *The Sea Road*. Storytelling, a recurring theme in the plots of the four novels, is paramount in *The Sea Road*. Here, Gudrid's story constitutes the second level of the main narrative frame, the story of herself and Agnar who is translating and transcribing her story. In this and the other novels, storytelling is referred to as a form of entertainment but also, and more importantly, as a source of knowledge. In the virtually 'textless' society from *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, or in the medieval communities from *Islanders* and *The Sea Road*, orality is still the principal form of tradition and the only vehicle of information. The knowledge achieved through listening to the stories is valuable, as it is not only the sole source of information but also a way to build up a sense of community. Elphinstone's discourse about orality and text becomes particularly relevant in *The Sea Road*. Here, the narrative is being transcribed into a written text from the oral source, and translated from Icelandic into Latin. The storyteller witnesses the writing process, which becomes central, a magical element in

itself. Thus, oral tradition ceases to exist through the establishment of one version of the story that promises to preserve it, unchanging.

Yet, language undergoes magic transformations. Several issues about language arise from the narrative. The multiplicity of languages is another issue in the novel. Gudrid's story is told in Icelandic, then transcribed and translated into Latin. However, Elphinstone's writing is in English. A suspension of disbelief is required: despite our awareness that the fiction of the novel should be read in Latin, readers of *The Sea Road* read the story in English. The meta-fictional coexistence of multiple languages moves *The Sea Road* further away from the conventions and boundaries of a realistic narrative, while pondering on language theory. Linguistic challenges involve the translation of Gudrid's story from Icelandic into Latin in the fictional narrative. The difficulties experienced in the task are laid bare by Agnar in the first few pages of his introduction to Gudrid's story: 'Meaning [...] lies in the words themselves. Change the words and the sense is no longer the same. To change a text from one language into another is a kind of lie' (p. 6). Changing the words of a story leads to a transformation of its meaning. Playing with two languages is felt to be an even riskier path by the translator. As in Elphinstone's early novels, the universality of language is undermined. Words may be unreliable tools for communication; sometimes they even become inadequate or meaningless. Elphinstone questions the validity of language as a solely rational instrument. Semantic distortion and the inability to share knowledge, as seen, for example, in *The Incomer*'s linguistic crisis after the rape or in Agnar's preoccupations that meaning might be 'lost in translation' in *The Sea Road*, are aspects that are constantly referred to throughout Elphinstone's fiction. And yet, despite the inconsistencies and ambiguities repeatedly pointed out, Elphinstone suggests that language does hold effective power, especially when not restricted to a binary logic, but open to a Derridean semantic plurality. In the text of *The Sea Road*, language is empowered by the semantic polyvalence of magic. Influenced by her pagan up bringing, even after her conversion to Christianity, Gudrid creates spells to protect her loved ones from evil. The magic power of

spells is identified in the words. The magic force concealed in language is the strongest element in her black arts: 'the best charms are just words. They are easy to carry about, and on the whole you don't lose them' (p. 58). Language is magic. The critical process of deconstruction of language finds a positive answer in *The Sea Road*, where language becomes a prime issue. Language is likened to magic: both are to be understood as systems of signs created by mankind to establish a relationship with the metaphysical world. In Elphinstone's words: 'Language and magic are both systems of signs and that is why they are very good images of one another'.[34] Like magic, language relies on a shared belief and the human need to question and find answers to ontological and epistemological concerns.

Magic has fascinated Elphinstone from the beginning of her writing career. Her first short story 'Spinning the Green', despite its inclusion in the science fiction anthology *Despatches From The Frontiers Of The Female Mind* (1985), according to the author, does not belong to this specific genre. In fact, later, Elphinstone has described her first published story, more as a 'parody of fairy tale or folk tale'.[35] 'Spinning the Green' is a modern fairy tale about a wifeless merchant and his three daughters. Although the traditional fairy tale opening line 'Once upon a time' suggests a setting in a remote past, some details in the story underline the ambiguity of the time setting. References, for example, to tranquillisers and the merchant's treacle business seem more appropriate to a modern tale than a traditional fairy tale and add to the surreal and nonsensical character of Elphinstone's parody. In her words: 'I was using traditional tales in response to a contemporary situation'.[36] Clear references to traditional European fairy tales and Scottish folk tales are employed by the author in the creation of her modern fairy tale. More specifically, the hypertext of 'Spinning the Green' is a parody of the hypotext of *Beauty and the Beast*. The merchant's three daughters Elsie, Lacie and Tilly are strongly reminiscent of the

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[34] 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.
[35] McGillivray, p. 31.
[36] Elphinstone 1992, p. 45.

traditional fairy tale. The elder daughters long for diamonds, gold, chocolate and 'a tract of primeval forest', whereas Tilly, the youngest child, only wishes for a red rose. While Tilly – like Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast* – is the cliché good heroine of fairy tales, her elder sisters are of a different nature:

> Elsie and Lacie were not clearly differentiated in the minds of anybody, they were just elder sisters, and from that you can draw your own conclusions. Tilly was as kind as she was good, and as good as she was beautiful, and as beautiful as she was kind. And if that doesn't tell you what you want to know, swallow your subversive curiosity and read on.[37]

The passage discloses the 'double code' of parody, its dual movements of departure and attachment to the hypotext. In 'Spinning the Green' several elements reveal similarities with *Beauty and the Beast*, in characterisation (the wifeless merchant and his three daughters) and plot (the financial collapse, the father's meeting with Beast, the rose incident, the youngest daughter's sacrifice and her final home visit). As well as similarities, distance is conveyed by the intrusive narrator of 'Spinning the Green', whose ironic addresses to the readers – 'draw your own conclusions' and 'swallow your subversive curiosity' – enhance the ambiguities of parody, as these stylistic distortions accentuate the critical parody of the fairy tale. Other distortions occur in characterisation. Compared to the hypotext, in 'Spinning the Green', the father's character seems to have lost his kindness and acquired a more ruthless, selfish attitude, as shown by his decision to send his daughter Tilly in ransom for his life, whereas in the fairy tale his daughter Beauty volunteers to sacrifice her life against his will. On the other hand, the two sisters' characterisation follows the original fairy tale formula of selfish, shallow and evil characters, to emphasise the selfless generosity of the youngest daughter. When Tilly is told by her father that she has to go and live in the forest with the Beast, as he collectively refers to his female abductors, the elder sisters suggest that she 'could always try kissing him. He might turn into a handsome prince' (p. 22), another reference to *Beauty*

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[37] Margaret Elphinstone, 'Spinning the Green', in *Despatches From The Frontiers of The Female Minds*, ed. by Jen Green and Sarah Lefanu (London: The Women's Press, 1985), pp. 15-26 (p. 15). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

and the Beast's well-known happy ending with the Beast's transformation into a handsome prince.

The most original movement of departure from the hypotext is provided by other transtextual allusions interwoven in the text of 'Spinning the Green'. Green, a particularly recurring colour in Elphinstone's stories, associates the traditional Celtic belief in fairies, the green people, with the author's environmental concerns. Although green refers manifestly to the endangered state of natural environment, in 'Spinning the Green', the colour imagery assumes a supernatural connotation borrowed from Celtic fairy belief. The green women of 'Spinning the Green' are sinisterly reminiscent of Celtic folk-tales and superstitions relating to the 'green lady', the ghostly woman dressed in green often associated with bad omens and death.[38] Simultaneously, green is natural and supernatural, and Elphinstone's story, typically, joins contemporary issues with the traditional magic world of folk and fairy tales. As in the hypotext, the merchant's business is facing financial difficulties, however, in 'Spinning the Green', the merchant's business troubles are subtly associated with environmental issues: 'the matter of spoil heaps had recently become a sticky issue in the environmentalist press' (p. 16). Furthermore, the merchant is told to export weapons hidden inside the treacle barrels and this is what leads him, unaware, through the 'Wild Forest'. The merchant falls in a trap virtually set by himself and has to face the green women, who treat him well until he decides to take away the rose branch. Later in the story, the environmental agenda becomes even more manifest after Tilly has spent some time in the forest and has become a spinner herself. It is made clear that the spinners are responsible for keeping the green alive: 'The seasons passed, and Tilly learned what she needed from the forest, and she learned also what the forest needed from her. She found out who she was, but that cannot be told outside of the wood, not yet' (p. 25).

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[38] See Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland or the History of Cromarty* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1835), p. 15. See also 'The Green Lady', in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Folk tales*, ed. by Neil Philips (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 395-99.

Towards the end of the story, Tilly's return to her father and sisters mirrors the crucial episode in *Beauty and the Beast*. The horrifying nightmare – 'she dreamed of things dying and forgotten, and in the centre of nightmare she saw a green web broken, a world where there were no more trees' (p. 26) – suggests the possibility of an awaiting natural catastrophe, even though the ending of the story is ambiguously open: is the disaster happening because Tilly has abandoned her spinning? Or is she running away from her family because of the impending tragedy? With no resolution and no magical transformation, unlike the traditional fairy tale, Elphinstone's story is left open-ended, with no happy ending except for the implied possibility of a return to the Green. Her parody of *Beauty and the Beast* takes on the political and social issues that concerned the author at the time of writing. Until the end of the story, the supernatural / natural green women, the magical Beast, are a destabilising force, rebelling against convention and subverting established order.

Magic subversion, traditional tales, and eco-agenda return in Elphinstone's later collection of short stories *An Apple From A Tree And Other Visions* (1991).[39] The surreal dimension of dreams is the common trait in all the stories and links them to the author's early novels. Through dreams, characters embark on quirky voyages to liminal spaces, which, although filled with surreal and magical atmosphere, retain a strong humanity. As underlined by Colin Manlove: 'the most constant use of the supernatural in these stories is to deconstruct modern rational awareness through its otherness'.[40] Characters hallucinate to grasp the unintelligible and their visions enlighten their view of the world, questioning their beliefs and challenging their rational understanding. Epistemological and social issues coexist strongly in the majority of the stories,

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[39] Elphinstone's concern with environmental matters has also inspired several works on organic gardening, such as *The Holistic Gardener* (co-authored, 1987) and *Organic Gardening* (1990), both significantly published not long before this collection of short stories.

[40] See Colin Manlove, *Scottish Fantasy Literature. A Critical Survey* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), p. 216.

as the irrational magic challenges rational thinking and critically investigate modern society.

The first story of the collection, 'The Green Man', bears evident links to the Scottish tradition. Evocative of the green people and fairyland,[41] the Green Man's name, Lin, establishes a specific connection with Tam Lin, the legendary hero of the Scottish ballad. As the author admits: 'When I called him 'Lin', I knew what I was doing, and I began with the idea of finding your 'green man' or Tam Lin'.[42] It seems plausible to suggest a comparison between the Scottish ballad of 'Tam Lin' and 'The Green Man'. The recurring mention of the colour green in the ballad establishes a first link with the imagery employed by Elphinstone. In the traditional ballad, however, green is also associated with Janet, the girl who manages to set Tam Lin free from the Fairy Queen:

> Janet has kilted her green kirtle
> A little aboon her knee,
> And she has broded her yellow hair
> A little aboon her bree,
> And she's away to Carterhaugh,
> As fast as she can hie. [43]

Secondly, in both the ballad and the story, Janet and Sarah deal with unknown, through an encounter with what lies beyond rationally acceptable reality. From the beginning of the story, Elphinstone builds up an eerie atmosphere around Lochskerrow Halt, to lead on to the Green Man's appearance: 'The most human feature of the valley was the railway',[44] 'her stomach registered something alien, another world' (p. 6). Readers and

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[41] For a longer discussion on the fairy belief in Lowland Scotland, see Hannah Aitken, *A Forgotten Heritage: Original Folk tales of Lowland Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973).

[42] McGillivray, p. 31.

[43] 'Tam Lin', in *Scottish Ballads*, ed. by Emily Lyle (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 125-131 (p. 125). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. To view different versions of the ballad of 'Tam Lin', see *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1, pp. 340-368. For a critical background on 'Tam Lin', see E. B. Lyle, 'The Ballad of 'Tam Lin' and Traditional Tales of Recovery from the Fairy Troop', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 6 (1968-69), 175-85; John Niles, '"Tam Lin": Form and Meaning in a Traditional Ballad', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 38 (1977), 336-47.

[44] Margaret Elphinstone, *An Apple From A Tree and Other Visions* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. 3. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

character can almost anticipate the uncanny episodes to follow. The ambiguous setting of the story establishes a second parallel with the beginning of the ballad of 'Tam Lin':

> O I forbid you, maidens a',
> That wear gowd on your hair,
> To come or gae by Carterhaugh,
> For young Tam Lin is there. (p. 125)

Placing is fundamental in the ballad: Janet's father's castle (safe and inhabited by virgins) is juxtaposed to Carterhaugh (dangerous and haunted by Tam Lin), stressing the boundary separating the 'real' world and the supernatural world.[45] Similarly, in Elphinstone's story, it is significant that Sarah deliberately chooses to follow an alternative path from the main route, creating the condition for a fantastic adventure, by letting her rational boundaries fall and allowing her imagination free rein. As in most of Elphinstone's short stories, magic enters to help express a psychological state and to convey issues of a specific agenda. The vision of the Green Man represents Sarah's need to be challenged. Sarah goes on a journey of self-discovery, which casts shadows and doubts over her set beliefs. The meeting with the Green Man triggers the crisis. Reality no longer has the same order and Sarah goes through a dramatic, critical, phase of her artistic expression: 'Paint. A broken world. Sky split, pale distance. A way in. Black. Red. Hills, transmuted. Like Mars, red planet. No trees. No life. Green distance remaining. In perspective. Distance. Very frail, through the black. Then a red moon over it' (p. 46).

The encounter with the Green Man has undermined the authority of language and has raised epistemological questions. Words, clearly, fail to express reality, when Sarah and the Green Man attempt to communicate. Sarah learns that in his world there is no taboo and that words complicate things. The word 'Love', the Green Man says, has far too many meanings to it: 'You're trying to describe a rainbow, when the only colours you can see are indigo and violet' (p. 34). As Sarah struggles to find new words to express her

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[45] See Niles, pp. 339-341.

thoughts, her inability to communicate is a reflection of the revolution that has taken place in her mind. By accepting that her vision of the Green Man is real, she is forced to re-discuss her whole existence including her faith in language.

The conclusion looks simultaneously backwards and forward. Elphinstone seems to borrow again from anthropological beliefs and practices described by Frazer as the 'killing of the divine king',[46] a theme already employed in *A Sparrow's Flight*. The Green Man has to die in order for the world to follow its course. His death means life and rebirth for the planet: 'Life demands life. The seed has been sown and the green man must die. And I, Sarah, have named the place. I have dragged him back into this world and forfeited his life for a ruined harvest' (p. 69). This ending highlights Elphinstone's use of magic to facilitate her ecological agenda. By allowing Lin to go back to his own world, Elphinstone has subverted the traditional folk tale where Janet succeeds in reclaiming Tam Lin back from fairyland. Instead, Sarah renounces her own lover for his own sake, and hoping that there might be a better life for him in his world.

From the beginning, environmental concerns are an undercurrent of the story. When Sarah tastes the Green Man's food, she observes that 'the drink tasted green, like new peas, or the pale hearts of lettuces' (p. 10) and the bread tastes 'more alive than ordinary food' (p. 11). These remarks underline both the uncanny element of Sarah's experience and the moral concerns behind it: the Green Man represents life, and through him Sarah is questioning her own existence. The centrality of the theme of life and death constitutes, arguably, the most important parallel between Elphinstone's story and the ballad of 'Tam Lin'.[47] Previously in this chapter, the theme of the god's return from the other world has been linked to the ancient 'nature cults' and fertility rituals. The notion that Lin is a supernatural creature is suggested repeatedly when Sarah thinks of him as a fertility god or 'John Barleycorn' (p. 23). Elphinstone's choice of the ballad of 'Tam Lin' was surely made because of this. And life does seem to be

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[46] See Frazer, pp. 264-283.
[47] About the centrality of life and death in 'Tam Lin', see Niles, p. 343.

reasserted in the end, as an ambiguously positive thought leaves character and reader space for meditation: 'Either this world is doomed, she thought, or it is saved. But my thoughts are my own, and my memories, and the thoughts will be made into pictures, whether they change anything or not, until I reach the end of the journey' (p. 72).

A similar focus on the doomed state of the world recurs in the two related stories 'Conditions of Employment' and 'The Cold Well'. In the first story, Miranda is the keeper of a magical well. The unusual nature of the job and the strange time warp Miranda lives in, link these two stories to the magic realist atmosphere of 'The Green Man'. As the significantly named employer Oddny admits, the well keeper's job is 'unpredictable'. As 'Mistress of the Sacred Well', a fortune-telling priestess, Miranda has several encounters with characters from a remote past age. These fantastic encounters are juxtaposed against the more realistic visits into the 'normal' present world Miranda eventually returns to, refreshed by her magical experience as well keeper. Both stories stress the importance of magical vision or the ability to foresee, imagine and view things in an alternative way. As Oddny tells Miranda, at the end of the first story:

> You have achieved something which I now see was most urgent and necessary. I thought you rather demanding at the time and, really, I can do my job quite well without having rocks hurled at me. But we are here to help, and so supplicants can ever be ignored once they take the trouble to ask. I should have remembered then that there are two sides to everything. (p. 142)

Miranda has succeeded in getting the key to the well from the 'Guardian of the Sleeping King', after warning him that 'death threatens the earth on every side' (p. 136), a hint to the ecological concerns more directly focussed on in 'The Cold Well'. Here, the reader follows the story of Oddny's journey during her absence from the well. Oddny is to find out the cause of the sinister environmental problems causing mysterious deaths amongst the animals. Water imagery pervades the story from the beginning. The natural beauty and power of unpolluted water is emphasised on several occasions at the beginning

of the story: 'She sat under the waterfall, letting the burn wash over her. The falls were white and full, churning the pool into a froth of air bubbles and brown water' (p. 145). In stark contrast to the cool and pristine waterfall, the natural elements are held in captivity within the nuclear station Oddny visits towards the end of the story. Earth, water, fire and air, separated from their natural harmonious symbiosis, are turned against each other in a dangerously artificial world. Here, 'the water was sick and lifeless, not even aware of her presence' (p. 170). Natural life has been captured and held prisoner for the artificial creation of nuclear energy. The demands of modern society, responsible for the doom cast upon the deer, become the object of Oddny's powerful vision:

> She saw danger sealed here, while the land changed and the sea advanced and retreated, the rivers altered their courses in the slow washing of the hills to the sea. [...] The danger was far stronger than she realised. She was confronting it now. It loomed over her, aware of her. She experienced it as a series of images because that way she could make sense of it. (p. 171)

The story ends with Oddny's bitter impression that she has no power to change the course of human history, and the supplicant's decision to go 'away'. The implication that there might be another dimension, a different world where nature can survive is left suspended, while Oddny is, made aware 'for the first time that it [the water from the well] was very cold' (p. 176).

The contrast between two different worlds is at the centre of 'An Apple from a Tree'. A bite from a mysterious apple triggers Alison's encounter with a strange creature seemingly landed from a different world in the middle of Edinburgh's Botanic Gardens. The episode is evocative of 'Thomas the Rhymer', where the Fairy Queen produces an apple as a gift for Thomas:

> Syne they came on to a garden green,
> And she pu'd an apple frae a tree:
> 'Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,
> It will give thee the tongue that can never lie'.(p. 134)

The reference to the Scottish ballad establishes an immediate link with the supernatural world anticipating the dreamlike atmosphere of the story.

Nosila is, literally, Alison's inverse double: she answers Alison's greeting in a voice that sounds like 'my own voice coming back at me' (p. 182) and Alison notes that 'Our hands were the same size, small but square and firm. Hers were more roughened than mine but there seemed to be no other difference (p.192). Alison's adventure with Nosila establishes a parallel with the long-standing tradition of Scottish doubles, which the author plays with for her own purposes. Deceptively attractive and naive, Nosila does in fact represent a destabilising force in her new context. Brought to this world through a gesture evocative of original sin, she represents the unknown other world and embodies a moral code and social behaviour different from Alison's own.[48] As in 'The Green Man', Alison's beliefs are challenged as she starts to look at the world she inhabits through Nosila's perspective. Suddenly, language appears too limited a means to express ideas and feelings and to explain the uncanny situation she finds herself in, and Alison becomes aware of the limits of language especially as she reflects on Nosila's inability to communicate: 'It occurred to me that she could not help being completely literal. Although she spoke as fluently as I did, perhaps her grasp of language did not go so far. If she sought for nuances in anything, it was clearly not in words' (p. 187). Nosila's inability to articulate her arguments is only one aspect of her social inadequacy. Nosila never wears shoes or clothes and is oblivious to nakedness, and when Alison succeeds in dressing her, Nosila still believes clothes are only useful if you need to carry something in their pockets.

Nosila's failed attempt of communication with human beings and her conversations with houseplants suggest that she comes from (and represents) a world closer to nature than Alison's Edinburgh. Indeed, when Alison bites again into the magic apple, the two are thrown out of the Botanic Gardens and land 'like a four-legged monster' on the thick grass in Nosila's world, where the sky is blue and the forest untouched. As the story develops, the awareness dawns that the possibility of them inhabiting the same world is unlikely. Ultimately, Nosila represents Alison's longing for a better world and a less

[48] See 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.

conventional existence, as suggested at the end of the story when Nosila and Alison finally part:

> The world flung away from me. The bars bucketed like a boat in a storm. The apple was wrenched away and something else, splitting away from my side like my heart being torn out, but I went on holding. I held so hard the iron bit into me and I heard someone scream. It was I, and someone other, spinning away from me, out of the world.
> (p. 201)

Paradoxically, their separation represents the highest moment of self-revelation as Alison discovers the truth behind the vision. Like Sarah and Miranda, Alison is alienated, out of her own world. The encounters with alien creatures reveal altered states of mind, as Colin Manlove suggests: 'To a large extent these stories deal with aliens because the humans in them are alienated'.[49] The magic encounters and events in the stories from *An Apple from a Tree* push the boundaries of realism open to accept the irrational, and ultimately to question the existence of such boundaries.

Elphinstone's employment of transtextual strategies has established relationships between precedent texts, belonging to different sets of traditions (Christian and pagan myths, Scottish and Scandinavian oral tradition, worldwide folk tales) and her own. Readers are invited to establish parallels, throughout the material borrowed from tradition: the use of Tarot imagery and references to the Holy Grail, the Scottish doppelgänger, the fairy tale characters, the plots of the Icelandic sagas. These and all other references add strength to the issues that engage her fiction, environmental concerns, gender issues, language, and knowledge. The epistemological and ontological questions raised by the enigmatic worlds of *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* acquire a richer complexity through the transtextual references to Eliot's poetry, the legend of Parsifal and the Holy Grail. The issues become less concerned with the immediate worlds of the novel and become part of a more universal discourse.

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[49] See Manlove 1994, p. 225.

Within her fiction, which constantly seems to look at the past searching for themes and images, Elphinstone brings forward and discusses modern issues of gender, language and environment. Underlying her fiction is the philosophical investigation about existence, gender, environment, and ultimately language. Her references to traditional Celtic fairy beliefs in her short stories and the fairy tale parody of 'Spinning the Green' place magic in the realistic narratives, blurring the boundaries between rational thinking and irrational imagination. The intrusion of subversive magic in the 'real' world challenges the known boundaries of rational knowledge, gender roles, social convention and language. Whether set in far away worlds or remote past ages, her stories are concerned with the contemporary world. As Elphinstone has recently suggested, fantasy originates from the ability and the desire to look at things from an alternative point of view:

> I always look at real places and think of how they could be or have been. What would Byres Road be like if there were byres here? And where we are was moorland and Glasgow was over there? I think about things like that. It interests me. I notice if there is an old building and I think what was here before any of the rest of it... was it all fields?[50]

Elphinstone's alternative worlds and her interest in the past stem from the same root. The desire to project the world in the future (or re-imagine it in the past) originates from the need to recreate an alternative perspective on the present. In this process, Elphinstone challenges the precedent texts which she uses as a starting point. Magic seems inherent in all the traditional elements Elphinstone plays with. Whether derived from continental fairy tales, Scottish folk tales or Icelandic sagas, traditional supernatural and modern magic are moulded and joined up with Elphinstone's agenda. Her work mixes the traditional, the supernatural and the magical in narrative trajectories which subversively address the contemporary world. This co-ordination of magical tropes and narrative strategies allows her to question the entrenchment of traditions and to attempt to open new paths, crossing boundaries, and moving away from the

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[50] 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', appendix.

beaten tracks towards uncharted territories. Her work records the quests of her characters as it asks questions of the very traditions it draws upon.

Chapter Three

Oneiric Fantasies and Magical Journeys: Alison Fell's *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput*

Mìorbhail an t-sneachda
Gach criostal àraid
Gach criostal gun chàraid
Meanbh-chlachaireachd
Gach lóineag a' tàthadh
Saoghal fo chidhis

marvel of snow
every crystal unique
every crystal without peer
micro-masonry
every flake cementing
a world beneath its mask

(Aonghas MacNeacail, from 'an cathadh mor')

Oneiric Fantasies and Magical Journeys: Alison Fell's *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput*

A reading of Alison Fell's fiction reveals a persistent interest in narratives that stretch beyond the boundaries of realism. The desire to experiment with trans-generic fiction, born of the marriage between the real and the surreal, illustrated in the choice of themes and imagery, and the creation of a structure and a style to fit them, stems from Fell's uneasiness about realism: 'there is something about my mind that feels trapped, that wants to be elsewhere than where it is in a realistic narrative'.[1] Her stories often present an ambiguous combination of realistic characters and fantastic situations; settings and episodes are often enclosed in a frame of parallel narratives and intertextual insertions.

The three narrative strategies of magic all appear in Fell's texts. Magical characters interact with 'real' ones, as surreal settings lower their boundaries with their realistic surroundings: reality and magic are interconnected and interwoven (immanence). Magic subverts laws, roles and identities. No longer fixed, identities fluctuate and often change dramatically (inversion). Narratives are fragmented, interrupted and disseminated with other texts, with which Fell's own narratives establish transtextual links (*collage*).

Magic is always the carrier of metamorphosis. Dream worlds and magical journeys often lead characters through a process of transformation. Whether they are lands far away from the characters' daily lives (*The Mistress of Lilliput or The Pursuit*) or fantasy dimensions (*The Bad Box*), their voyages to unknown or imaginary territories always lead characters through crucial paths towards self-determination. The characters' transformations are not imposed by external agents, but the metamorphoses are the results of their struggles to overcome

[1] 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

boundaries set by external constructions such as gender, society and environment. Dissatisfied with the contexts they live in, characters embark on imaginary and 'real' journeys to challenge their own limits and attempt to make a change. Overcoming the known boundaries, magic transports characters into the unfamiliar, the uncanny, the grey area of questioning. Whichever form magical voyages might take, oneiric fantasies and exotic journeys to quirky foreign lands equally force characters to envisage alternative representations of reality. Characters (and readers) are called to review their preconceptions and beliefs as they are placed before situations that challenge their minds and familiar habits of understanding.

Such reviewing process is also reinforced by the employment of transtextuality. As in Elphinstone's texts, references to pre-existing texts invite readers to compare and observe the transformation enacted by the author. Unlike Elphinstone's solid references to various precedent texts, Fell's employment of other sources shifts towards a broken, multi-faceted narrative and is more similar to Hayton's own narrative style. Both Fell's and Hayton's narratives are interrupted, fragmented and interwoven with secondary texts, plots and narratives. The result, and paradoxically, the origin, of these texts is a schizoid type of narrative, in which different voices coexist, undermining a monolithic, unilateral and strictly rational interpretation.

Despite their recurrence in Fell's subsequent fiction, magic and surreal themes are almost entirely absent from Fell's first novel *Every Move You Make* (1984).[2] The prominent relevance of the main character's dream activity, however, already shows the germ of imagination engaged in the creation of a non-rational existence. The surreal nature of the visions often interrupts the otherwise realistic narrative and adds an intriguing twist to June's story. The most dramatic episodes and frequent crises of her life are reflected in the nightmarish scenarios crowding her sleep and waking dreams. Night and day,

[2] Before *Every Move You Make* was published in 1984, Fell's only fictional work was her children's novel *The Gray Dancer* (1981).

June is subject to visions which become insightful clues to her psychological state:

> And then everything began to happen too fast. Somewhere a liquefaction was going on; a personality was melting. [...] It was a journey of erratic speed, rainbow-coloured, through shifting spirals of sea-shells and whorled molluscs and silver-frilled, undulating star-fish. A journey without words, of image, sound, sense – a roller-coaster dash down into the waters of a bay, down into phosphorescence.[3]

A similar visionary element exists in *Mer De Glace* (1991). The narrative is divided into three main chapters, 'The Ice Mirror', 'The Ice Mother' and 'The Sea of Ice': the metaphorical titles play with the different translations of the French 'Mer de Glace' and stress the impact of the icy Alpine landscape on the characters. Even more than in *Every Move You Make*, the psychological development of the principal character, Kathleen, is affected by the surreal aspects of her 'real' world, as trivial scenarios feed grotesque elements into the narrative of *Mer De Glace*: 'There's no easier place to fall apart in than a supermarket. Too many chrome surfaces reflect you already in bits or at odd distorting angles'.[4] Distortion of reality is also reflected by the structure and the main theme of the narrative. The story, told from many angles, is a complex narrative that divides itself into a web of multiple texts and subtexts. Characters are progressively lost in a tangle of impossible relationships. The presence of several texts creates interruptions, questions the possibility for the story to be told in a linear way and denies a happy solution to the characters' intertwined relationships. Kathleen, the writer who starts a relationship with a married man who is committed to an obsessive love for the mountains, becomes gradually trapped in the strong imagery that dauntingly dominates the narrative. The mountains represent obstacles impossible to overcome, heights against which Kathleen is forced to admit her smallness, her fragility and her inevitable defeat. Readers are left baffled by the plurality of narrative voices. The fragmented structure and broken continuity of the narrative stress the impossibility of

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[3] Alison Fell, *Every Move You Make* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 125.
[4] Alison Fell, *Mer De Glace* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 171.

understanding, explaining or justifying the love triangle established by the characters.

Different points of view are also a feature of Fell's editing of a Japanese traditional text, *The Pillow Boy of the Lady Onogoro* (1994). The erotic episodes of the life of Onogoro in eleventh-century Japan are a complex narrative. The coexistence of several points of view is a consistent feature through the text. Pillow boy Oyu is a blind storyteller who whispers stories and legends in Onogoro's ear during her sexual encounters, and the words of the erotic stories are Onogoro's secret way to reach sexual climax. The voyeurism implicit in the story results in the fragmentation of points of view and the coexistence of different narrative levels:

> Hearing her cries of gratification, Oyu was too gratified, for his nature, as befitted his modest station in life, tended to the worshipful, and if the restrictions of his role caused him undue suffering, he could console himself with the thought that the General might in this instance be the craftsman of love, but he who addressed the deeper complexities of the heart was most certainly the artist.[5]

Curious as these texts are, *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput* are the most revealing of Fell's 'magic' narratives. Although the two stories are set in very different times and places (twentieth-century Scotland, eighteenth-century England, South Seas and France), several elements suggest similarities between them.

First, in persistent, if interrupted and unpredictable ways, magic is part of the narrative worlds. In *The Bad Box*, magic is primarily provided by Isla's imaginary creation of a parallel dimension and a double, the Hind Girl. Although the Hind Girl and Isla live in separate worlds, the boundaries between the two are never very clearly defined: while the Hind Girl is a creature of Isla's imagination, Isla depends on her imaginary twin to overcome difficult situations and ultimately escape from 'the bad box'. In *The Mistress of Lilliput* the presence of magic is more subtle and understated, and yet more challenging. The coexistence of the main character Mary Gulliver's realistic point of view

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[5] Alison Fell, *The Pillow Boy of the Lady Onogoro* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1994), p. 24.

with that of her doll Lady Mary, who is the narrator of the story, crucially places magic at the core of the narrative of *The Mistress of Lilliput*. By having a doll narrator, Fell inevitably forces a subversion of rational conventions, as the inanimate becomes animate and takes on an independent life and faculty of judgement. Subversively, the doll's point of view inverts the hierarchy of points of view, as the main perspective is no longer that of the male hero, but one of a female-engendered object. Moreover, the suspension of disbelief forced upon the reader by the doll narrator enhances and multiplies the non-realistic dimension of Swift's narrative.

Secondly, there is a strong emphasis, in both novels, on the process of self-determination and personal growth that the two characters, Isla and Mary, experience in the narratives. In *The Bad Box*, the realistic narrative describes the process of Isla's coming of age and reflects all the crises and difficulties associated with adolescence. It is magic that transforms this world for Isla: her power of imagination allows for the metamorphosis of the surrounding world while simultaneously, through the enactment of change, she becomes progressively aware of being in control of her own existence. During this process, gender roles are critically discussed from Isla's point of view, as sexuality and gender identity become part of her life. The emphasis on sensual development and the physical manifestations of gender are central in *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Having embarked on a long journey that will, theoretically, reunite her with her beloved husband, Mary goes through many changes while tracking Gulliver's footsteps. Fell's gendered pastiche focuses on the double – physical and intellectual – development of her female heroine. Both the doll's ironic point of view and the gender switch highlight the evolution in Mary Gulliver's increasing awareness of her body and mind from the beginning of her journey to the South Seas. From a marginal, lonely woman, Mary is drastically transformed by her newly developed sensual awareness and her acquired self-confidence. The transformations occurred are the result of the journey, which having led Mary beyond the familiar surrounding of her domestic household, have challenged her beliefs, perceptions and her emotions.

Finally, *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput* reveal a consistent use of transtextuality. The secondary narrative of *The Bad Box*, the Hind Girl's story, is strongly evocative of a traditional West Highland tale, 'The Weaver's Son'. The allusions to the folk tale allow Fell to play with the precedent text, refashioning the original to suit her re-interpretative agenda. The transformations she enacts in her own story underline her departure from the precedent text, while they signal the author's intention to enforce her agenda through her own version of the story. In the pastiche of *Gulliver's Travels*, the relationship established with the precedent text is primarily one of stylistic imitation. The ironic tone of the narrative should not be misinterpreted as a satirical parody or as the author's attempt to trivialize Swift's narrative. The mockingly playful mood of the story is dictated by the narrator, which, it must not be forgotten, is a toy. The new story, is the story of the doll and the hierarchical inversion and the central role acquired by Mary determine the shifted focus of the narrative. The gender switch operated in *The Mistress of Lilliput*, is a strategy that allows the narrative to concentrate on Mary's character and to imagine her own story, rather than demolishing the historical significance of Lemuel Gulliver's adventures.

Two parallel stories coexist in *The Bad Box* and constitute two narrative levels in the novel. The first level of the narrative is Isla's story, set in various locations in Scotland, in the 1960s: the reference to the foot and mouth epidemics sets the narrative in that decade. The second level is the Hind Girl's story, a timeless narrative with cryptic references to Isla's main narrative. The coexistence of two parallel stories in *The Bad Box* incorporates the magical adventures of the Hind Girl within Isla's own realistic story, creating a fusion of genres and styles typical of Fell's fiction.

Structural division is mirrored by thematic division, a central motif in both stories. Isla's narrative focuses on the Scottish girl's inner division between the paternal emotional bond to a rather idealised Highland world and the maternal tie to the reality of the Lowlands and the Borders. Isla's state of alienation is

reflected in the supernatural tale of the Hind Girl, a magical creature born of a deer. Half human and half deer, the Hind Girl is also divided between her loyalty towards her mother and a love-hate relationship with her father, her supernatural dimension and the human world of her lover.

Several opposing themes run through the novel on both levels of the narrative. The dual conflict between Highlands and Lowlands is a constant theme throughout the narrative. From the earliest stages of the narrative, Isla shows her strong tie with the Highlands, asserting repeatedly the supremacy of the idealised Dalriach over the prosaic reality of Brucekirk, as seen in the opening scene of the novel, when Isla plays by the pond in a highly idyllic setting: 'She wanted to stay for ever with her fingers in the feel of the water, thinking about what they called paradise, and how things came and went from it'.[6] Isla's attachment to the Highland world represented by Dalriach (Gaelic for 'the field strewn with boulders') is always expressed in powerful terms, creating the foundation both for her childhood dream and the magical plot, while the feeling of belonging to the Highlands is set in contrast with her mother's dislike of the place:

> She searched her mind for signs. True, of course, that her mother was no Highlander, like her father, but Lowland born. True also that when relations came up from the south and asked how she liked it here Isla had never seen her do more than shrug and say I like it fine.
>
> She thought back to Brucekirk and the Borders, or what she'd seen of them on summer holidays. It was hard to understand how anyone could be homesick for these flat soft fields and the brown sandstone houses huddled so narrowly along the pavements. The shops, the picture-houses maybe: she could see that her mother could miss all that. But compared to Glenalastair? No, she simply couldn't see the sense of it. (p. 25)

The Lowlands landscape feels alien and devoid of character, a world where Isla is not able to identify herself with. Her rejection of the Lowlands affects Isla's psychological development, as it detaches her from her mother's world and, at the same time, from her own womanhood. By deliberately choosing to be 'Isla of Dalriach' instead of 'Christine Cameron's girl', Isla repudiates a conventional

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[6] Alison Fell, *The Bad Box* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

gender identity for a more universal and magical dimension than the prosaic 'pedigree' of her Borders relations. Her preference of the Highland bond is significantly endorsed by Isla's awareness that 'by the burn or in the forest you could be boundless and invisible; by the boulders you could be more naming than named' (p. 39), and her choice of the elemental rather than the social world. While the Highland experience represents freedom, openness and endless possibilities, the Borders embody entrapment, enclosure and the imposed limits of 'the bad box'. Feelings of entrapment and estrangement become even more evident when communicating with the Lowlanders. The impossible effort to establish some kind of communication highlights the conflict between the two worlds:

> Not only her accent was wrong for the south, but also there was much that couldn't be said, for fear that the Lowland children would look at her slant and call her mad. She had to watch her mouth always, for what would come out of it. She might have said daft things: that the light was a dull smear, and earth and sky seemed to fold in on one another. (pp. 39-40)

The issue of communication is central to an understanding of Isla's inner division. Her inability to understand and be understood by the Lowlanders is not just due to a different variety of dialects, as her accent represents. It is rather that her voice is a strange intonation, an uncanny way of thinking. As Flora Alexander argues, 'through Isla's perceptions the nature of Scotland as an amalgam of contrasting subcultures is displayed. Removed from a Highland Eden to the South where she is not understood, she is regarded as being either depressed or mad'.[7] Isla's mind belongs to the Highlands and, having been brought up on the supernatural legends evoked by the places of her childhood, the habit of story telling never leaves her. Trapped in the Lowlands, Isla accentuates this last aspect of her Highlandness. By idealising the world left behind and making stories to revive it, she can forget the ugliness of the Borders. The Lowlands become 'the bad box', a claustrophobic place inevitably

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[7] Flora Alexander, 'Contemporary Fiction III: The Anglo-Scots', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 630-40 (p. 635).

opposed to the earthly paradise of the open spaces at Dalriach. The polar opposite to the enchanted world of the Highlands, the Lowlands represent a world where only sadness and badness can take place:

> Everything felt cruel needles here, where people had to lose sweetheart or husband and put a brave face on it. She saw her grandmother crying like a wee girl under the covers. She saw her mutter to herself with the night empty around her, summoning ghosts. And it wasn't fair, to be back in the bad box again with her father bitter in the front seat and that laugh of his to make up for it. (p. 40)

Once again, in her rejection of the bad box of the Lowlands, Isla feels closer to her father, who is also unwilling to be part of the Lowlands. Isla's interpretation of the Lowlands as a loveless world is influenced by her own emotional imbalance, having left a part of her self attached to her idealised Highland world. Fell's description of the inner conflict within Isla's self, entrapped in the dullness of the Borders, while dreaming of the magic of the Highlands, echoes the author's autobiographical experience, reflecting the emotional traumas of her departure from the Highlands:[8]

> When I was about three, we moved to Hamilton, near Glasgow. That was a very dark, post-war, poverty-stricken town, as I remember. It inspired parts of *The Bad Box*. Then [...] we moved to a small village in the Highlands, Kinloch Rannoch where I learned to read in a tiny school room by a waterfall. [...] After a few years because of a family death in the Borders we had to move back to Lochmaben which was a big trauma for me. [...] I was so attached to the mountains and then I fell into this bad space. I had to cope with a new school, kids who spoke with a different accent.[9]

The theme of division expressed through the Highlands / Lowlands, father / mother conflict corresponds to the gender conflict child / woman and to the polar stages of Isla's sexual and emotional development. At first, her childhood relationship with Ray is rich with echoes of the idealised Highland world. Towards the end, the bitter conclusion of the innocent relationship with Ray signposts the crucial threshold Isla is forced to cross in order to enter a new

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[8] See Alexander 1997, p. 634.
[9] 'Interview with Alison Fell', see Appendix.

stage in her life. It is from this division that the other important themes of the novel originate. Fell's interpretation of the Scottish doppelgänger conveys the struggle to understand and find out the truth about oneself. As with other 'double' characters in the works studied in this thesis, Hester and Hesione or Alison and Nosila,[10] Isla and the Hind Girl represent the two poles of a journey of discovery. While the Hind Girl is making a journey to find her father, Isla's story also features a strong presence of moving and travelling, emphasising the changes the character is facing and the new possibilities open to her life as a result of the geography she moves through.

At the core of *The Bad Box* is an archetypal quest of self-discovery. Although the pursuit of immediate aims can camouflage the real purpose behind the journey, in both narratives dramatic events are the catalysts of the long processes of self-discovery. The quest follows two parallel paths: Isla's childhood dream, the realistic narrative focussing on her idyllic relationship with Ray; and Isla's imaginary creation of her own alter ego, the Hind Girl, and the magic narrative of the quest. The creation of a story within the story raises two further questions as the relationships and boundaries between the two narratives are left unexplained, and the two stories seemingly follow independent paths. A few hints in the realistic narrative, however, seem to demonstrate the interdependence of the Hind Girl's narrative as the result of Isla's creative imagination. If the Hind Girl's narrative is explained in psychological terms, then why does Isla invent the story? What does the ending of the story mean to her? Bruno Bettelheim's and Jacqueline Rose's theories will help us to answer these questions. Secondly, the introduction of a story inspired by a traditional folk tale suggests Fell's interest in transtextuality, a strategy she takes further in *The Mistress of Lilliput.*

The childhood dream begins and develops in the Highlands, an environment evocative of magic, legend and myth inspired by the dramatic beauty of the landscape. Here, Isla and Ray, children of family friends, develop

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[10] See chapters on Sian Hayton and Margaret Elphinstone. See also section on the doubles in the introduction of this thesis.

a close relationship, at times reminiscent of Heathcliff and Cathy in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). As in Brontë's novel, the two young characters are tied together by a strong bond. The ambiguity of their bond makes it more difficult to define and at the same time more powerful because it cannot fall into a pre-defined category: 'Ray and Isla, Isla and Ray. A right pair of dreamers, said the Camerons and the Beattys, unable to decipher the bond between them. But weren't you, if the truth be told, brother and sister, separated at birth?' (p. 8) Partly because of the adults' inability to interpret their special relationship, there is a hint at a supernatural bond, that Isla and Ray used to belong to the same body, were once one flesh, separated by destiny at birth. An impossible liaison to the adult eyes of their parents, their bond is based on camaraderie between equals who acknowledge each other's differences:

> She looked sideways at Ray. Not that they were alike. She was skinny and mouse-coloured, whereas he was thick-set and dark, with wary brown eyes and reddish eyebrows and a fussy, clipped way of speaking which sounded almost English. And sometimes he could be superior, it was true, but one thing he'd never do, unlike the others at school, was turn your stories down, or laugh at them, or string you along with his own ones only to Huntigowk you just when you were deep in believing. (p. 8)

Not only exclusive of the adult world, the relationship is self-enclosed and separate from other children. Their bond overcomes age and gender and becomes a more universal relationship. Their fascination for the 'stories' represents, perhaps, the strongest bond Isla and Ray establish. Their inclination to mutual story telling and love for ancient legends reinforces the notion that myth plays a very strong part in the development of their relationship:

> Sometimes on card nights, when they both slept in her room, or else in Ray's loft with all its model aeroplanes dangling and spinning, he would whisper the myths to her in the dark. [...] Tales of the Spring Goddess Bride and her bards, green maidens who shone and sang secretly from the May blossom and tempted folk into her kingdom. And listening cold-nosed across the space between the beds you'd forget where you ended and the story began, so safe strangely with him that you thinned and spread far out, even up to the stars. (p. 9)

A shared bedroom becomes a stage to re-enact stories and ancient myths. The references to Celtic pagan legends gives a magical aura and adds more charm to the already strongly romanticised Highland setting, re-asserted as the setting of the childhood dream. It is the way in which the waking and dreaming worlds of consciousness and sleep are interwoven that seems deeply impressive and resonates hauntingly. Past traditions are evoked and come alive. They become central in the 'collective unconscious' that ties Isla and Ray while they share time together. Even after her departure from the Highlands, her parting from her childhood friend Ray and part of her Highland self, the supernatural traditions are a persistent point of reference in Isla's world.

The discovery of an albino hind in the forest is the climactic episode, which suggestively links the two narratives. The episode prompts the two children to trace its origin through their imagination. From the start, the hind represents a further element of distinction and shared identity in Isla and Ray's relationship, it constitutes the pretext for more story telling and for complicit understanding of a secret that they are only dimly aware of: 'the funny thing was that no one seemed to care but them. Just me and Ray, she thought, and the thinking set her somehow high and sleek and scornful. For wasn't it then their story to work and worry at, theirs and theirs only?' (p. 9). Myth plays a strong part in the development of the childhood dream. Besides sharing stories about others, they become involved in existential discussions about the nature of their selves and the possibility of imagining alternative identities for themselves. Reincarnation is faced as a possibility of being, with the chance of becoming or even having been somebody or something different altogether: 'a knight or a nobody or a newt, [...], or even a white cloud someone yearned into the world' (p. 10). From reincarnation, Isla and Ray move on to even stranger forms, through psychic magnetism, of guessing which shape their souls embodied in their previous lives. Isla finds another way of exercising her own imaginative power, by consciously creating an alternative identity for herself: 'Morgan Le Fay, I'll be' (p. 12). The possibility of being an evil creature foreshadows Isla's fascination with alternative identities and carries a certain degree of ambiguity.

Her choice implies the necessity of the 'bad box', a state of mind that perhaps even already at this stage, she is longing to share with her alter ego. The fantasy of being an evil fairy links Isla to other classic examples of the Scottish supernatural tradition. Tempted by the potential of an evil double, Isla is Jekyll's heir in her subdued anxiety and urge to transgress the stiffness of her imposed role and take over a secret identity to guarantee her freedom.

Isla's first attempt to take on a different identity is a further endorsement that the Hind Girl's story is a product of Isla's imagination. It creates the first step towards the creation of the double, her invention of the Hind Girl's story. In this creative moment, Isla also seeks a possible alternative identity for Ray, making him part of her own secret imaginary game of identity-swapping:

> Ray was closing his book now, standing up. Isla watched him covertly, seeing his change come over him. He had taken his glasses off, and his eyes dreamed out to the sea, and the wind blew his hair back over his forehead. He could have been a merman swimming underwater, or Barbarossa the pirate with a knife between his teeth, and it was magic, so it was. (p. 12)

The last phrase embodies the ambiguity inherent in Fell's text. 'So it was' is colloquial, ironic Scots, reaffirming the unbelievable story, yet it also carries a Biblical overtone of affirmation and conviction. To suggest the Scots voice in the phrase 'it was magic, so it was' is to infuse a seemingly objective description of a daydream with ironic, adult knowingness. Yet it also evokes an acceptance of the magical, transformative power of dream and imagination.

Past myths and remote history are full of the evocative names Isla adopts to re-create another story, and her identity with that of an alter ego. The childhood game is the first symptom of a search which sees Isla engaged in more role-playing activities with her Borders friend Wanda and in the Hind Girl's story. The more pressing the need to create an alternative identity, the more Isla becomes aware of her childhood dream's approaching a closure. The childhood dream is almost over, with Ray and the Highlands being only a memory stored at the back of Isla's mind. Caught in a reality which she finds deeply unattractive, Isla struggles to keep some of her Highland self and world

alive. With her new friend Wanda, Isla re-establishes her imaginary world in a different setting and with a different partner. The two playmates isolate themselves from the rest of the real world in a dimension that becomes only theirs: 'Every Saturday in the slatted haybarn striped with shadows they shut out the farmyard and the far spires of Brucekirk, and listened to the pressing scripts of their dreams' (p. 55). In the Lowlands, the strong urge to follow the script dictated by their imagination is also a symptom of the desire to find an alternative existence from everyday reality. Trapped in the dullness of the Border village, 'Isla might be bullfighter or ballerina, or master-builder irrigating the whole of India' (p. 55), while 'Wanda would be trapeze artist, or bareback rider, or rancher's wife who under cover of the night rode with outlaws' (p. 55). The twilight of the childhood dream starts to become more manifest as Isla's imagination begins to show different inclinations from the games shared with Ray. The fantasies shared with Wanda have a much stronger sexual undercurrent, showing that Isla is, after all, changing and growing out of her childhood. So Isla and Wanda can be Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, but they have to take their clothes off to make their games more real. Furthermore, Isla develops more of a leading role in the decisions to be made, sometimes forcefully asserting her own will over her friend: 'When [...] Wanda [...] refused Joan of Arc in men's clothes as well, Isla reckoned it was time she was taught a lesson' (p. 55). Gender awareness slowly grows to separate the two girls. While Isla, although manifestly titillated by the sexual innuendoes of their games, is still not completely aware of her sensual world, Wanda is more mature and accepting of her own sexual awakening. Her increasing sexual awareness runs parallel to the fading of her innocence and her childhood dream. Sleeping next to Ray meant sharing myths and secrets, but with Wanda, Isla discovers new, ambiguous, feelings:

> Cuddling was strange and for girls, really, whereas if you saw your hands chivalrous on the reins of a white horse, and Wanda snug behind you, holding on... She looked at Wanda's hot sleeping face... Yes, it was nobler, to be strong as a boy and up there protecting her. (p. 58)

Isla's refusal of her female role and her desire to be a stronger, protective, male figure for her friend indicates a rejection of reality but also foreshadows the end of her dream. Sexuality and gender roles, nonetheless, become more and more pressing issues as the story develops. Girls from the village openly flirt with boys. One of them becomes pregnant. Wanda starts a relationship with a Norwegian boy, while Isla is dispassionate about any of her potential sexual encounters. Womanhood is not particularly appealing, and while the girls at school are busy measuring up their waists and giggling about the facts of life, Isla 'didn't see what was so good about growing up to be a woman if it meant staying at home like that, and bleeding and having babies' (p. 72). By rejecting womanhood, Isla objects to growing up and to the ending of her childhood dream. While repressing the first signs of her sexual awareness, Isla finds her only shelter in the memories from her childhood, not only memories of her friendship with Ray, but also of the times when she shared an innocent relationship with her father:

> She remembered racing round and round the kitchen table for Daddy, rapturously bathed and naked, round and round, while he cried aye aye aye, look at the wee bare bum on it and when her knees sagged he'd call her in to his knee for a spoon of glucose and send her off sprinting, sleek as a hind and showing herself off for him. (p. 64)

Isla's body 'sleek as a hind' is another reference to her authorial identification with her imaginary double. These childhood memories clash with the reality that changes as time goes by and Isla has to come to terms with the different attitude her father and Ray show towards her. Her father flirts with her and her friends, making 'remarks which clung to your skin like stockings' (p. 100), and Ray, who now 'spits manfully', will not be allowed to sleep in the same bed as her. The dream is almost over, the illusion that the mythic childhood union could last forever is slowly crumbling inside Isla's mind when Ray admits with a hint of nostalgia and ambiguity: 'Those were the days, eh?' (p. 88).

The slow discovery of sexuality also marks the beginning of a different phase in the heroine's search for an identity and a role to perform. In a highly self-disclosing moment, Isla imagines herself naked, being watched by Ray,

allowing sex into her childhood dream for the first time: 'Oh Ray, how can you bear to see me naked and ashamed. Her reflection puts its hand over its mouth. These awful games, how could we? She laughed the memory away and looked and looked' (p. 109). This episode marks a crucial moment in Isla's evolution. Not only has Isla entered a different perception of her relationship with her childhood friend; she clearly shows a desire to reject the 'awful games' and leave behind the magic world of her past.

Symptomatically, the definitive end of the childhood dream coincides with unexpected sexual epiphany, during a visit Isla and Wanda make to Ray in the Highlands. Wanda ends up having an affair with Ray, who later dramatically dies in a car crash driving when drunk. Suddenly, the Highlands are not the innocent idyllic world, and Ray will no longer be able to share a mythic union with Isla. The sexual relationship between Wanda and Ray cracks the crystal shell of Isla's dream. Death puts a brutal end to the idealised Highland world. The dramatic conclusion of the visit to the Highlands represents the climax of this process of self-discovery. At the end of the novel, the last paragraph of the epilogue suggests hints of hope for a better and happier future: 'There was a sluggish mist over the rooftops, but later Edinburgh would be sharp and blue' (p. 167). The Borders might be misty but a strange atmosphere creates the almost cheerful effect of a 'happy-ending', where all the previously dark episodes are lightened by the ridiculous comic reference to Isla's father dancing the Highland Fling. After all, the sky will still be blue in Edinburgh, where a new chapter of Isla's life is about to start. The ending is almost a new beginning. As the text seems to suggest the overcoming of conflicts and dilemmas of her childhood, the significance of the secondary narrative becomes extremely relevant for the understanding of the novel's ending. It is the Hind Girl's magical quest that has reconciled Isla to an adult reality through the encounters with dream, wishfulness and sexual longing.

In his classic study of fairy tales *The Uses Of Enchantment* (1976) Bruno Bettelheim explores the field of story telling in the light of psychoanalytical

theories.[11] His main thesis relates the educational value of fairy tales to the psychological development of children and their passage into adulthood. Fairy tales represent reality in a way children are able to understand, with more space for magic and irrational elements than an adult mind would accept. Bettelheim emphasises the crucial importance of telling the traditional fairy tales to children, who are able to accept difficult issues, such as the existence of evil, illness and poverty in a less traumatic way. Bettelheim's theories of story telling may help in the interpretation of Isla's creation of the Hind Girl's story. By creating the Hind Girl's story Isla projects her real world into an imaginary dimension in order to understand the logic behind it and find a solution that can reconcile the extremes. As in traditional fairy tales, magic is present in the Hind Girl's story from the very beginning, when the half-human half-animal creature is born of a deer, to the astonishment of the men witnessing the event. The belief follows that some kind of bad omen must be hidden behind the anomalous birth. Superstition and belief in the supernatural are a consistent element of the Hind Girl's narrative, as she tries to bring Alec along to help her in her quest. Although mute, the Hind Girl communicates with the boy, establishing a relationship of trust based on a suspension of disbelief: 'If you are wanting to know where I've come from, there's little I can say that you'll believe. So I tell you this story only if you'll stay with me and listen to the very far end, beyond all that is doubting and fickle and feckless'. (p. 48) With these words, echoing a magic spell, the Hind Girl succeeds in bewitching Alec whose heart she seems to have already conquered: 'Witch or daftie or whatever she was, what did he care, if she'd only sit by him with her long hair' (p. 48).

Beside the employment of magic, there are more parallels between the Hind Girl's story and Bettelheim's theories of the traditional fairy tales. According to Bettelheim, one of the crucial aspects of fairy tales focuses on the presence of an inner or outer conflict causing a dilemma in the hero / heroine's self. Characters often have important choices to make, which eventually lead to

[11] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Use of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy tales* (1976) (London: Penguin, 1991).

the fairy tale's happy endings. The Hind Girl represents a conflict within her own nature: half human and half animal, she embodies the duality recurring throughout the narrative. Her search, triggered by a desire for revenge, is expressed in terms of polar extremes opposing her mother on one side and her father on the other. As the Hind Girl admits, the ultimate reason for the journey is 'to talk or tear him from his black spire, his thistles and his rings of lightning, and bring him to the place where my mother waits, and where spring is' (p. 59). The opposing mother and father are also symbolically expressed in the spring and winter contrast, emphasising the idea of the conflict on one side, and the difficulties and hardship of the adventure on the other. Towards the end of the story, the Hind Girl's inner conflict becomes more complex as the heroine is torn between the two poles of her dilemma, unsure whether to keep her loyalty to her mother who sent her on this mission, or to side with her father instead:

> She looked at her sinewy strong legs and saw they were like his. She clenched her fist and felt the hunter in her own flesh straining to be free. And she raged at her mother for the bonds of blood and tides which held her to the earth, and the loyalty which tied her to her promise. (p. 117)

In this crucial moment of self-reflection, the dilemma becomes less clear, as the opposites of mother and father, well defined up until this point, shift in the Hind Girl's mind. For the first time, the Hind Girl questions the reasons behind the mission of revenge commanded by her mother and, ultimately, her existence. A new conflict also arises as the Hind Girl's father questions the validity of her bond with Alec. The opposition between her father's and Alec's love represents the threshold both the Hind Girl and Alec have to cross in order to become adults. The final double re-unions (father and mother, Hind Girl and Alec) constitute the solution of the dilemmas by annihilating all those oppositions that run through the plot of the Hind Girl. Even though dilemmas are solved, some questions remain open, such as Fell's treatment of the traditional materials adopted for the creation of the Hind Girl's story. The topic of the princess transformed into a deer, classified by Antti Aarne among the 'Tales of Magic' is

well spread across Europe and the Americas.[12] The West-Highland version of this tale, 'The Weaver's Son', could well be a possible source for Fell's creation of the Hind Girl's story.

'The Weaver's Son' is the story of a young man who succeeds in breaking the spell cast over the Deer-Princess and eventually marries the Princess who is, he discovers at the end, the Daughter of the King of the Great Isle. Several elements remain undisclosed in the folk tale. It is not quite clear, for example, why the Weaver's Son leaves his home island after having had a vision in which he sees a black man. Later, it is not explained why he is asked to kill the deer, since he is not a trained huntsman. The presence of magic is a further mysterious force running throughout the tale. The Deer Princess turns into a woman every time the Weaver's Son tries to shoot her. Afterwards, when she asks him to meet her at the church, he falls asleep under the effect of a witch's poisonous draft. Finally, in the last section of his adventure, he reaches the Deer Princess's island which lies 'far beyond the edge of the world',[13] with the aid of a magical bird. Once on the island, he is wounded and magically healed through the Deer Princess's indirect help. The story has an unusual happy ending, with the wedding between the Weaver's Son and the Daughter of the King of the Great Isle, a different pattern from the traditional unhappy unions between men and supernatural agents. As we read in John MacKay:

> In the case of a man marrying a deer-woman, she desires marriage as much as he does; she is not forced into it. The only obligation under which she lays him is to search for her. And the marriage comes at the end of the story, and they live happily ever after, and never dream of separating, in which matters the story differs fundamentally from tales of marriage with a supernatural. Therefore the woman in this story is no supernatural, but a mortal woman of solid flesh and blood.[14]

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[12] Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folk tale. A Classification and Biography*, Stith Thompson trans. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarium Fennica, 1964), p. 131 (folk tale type no. 401). See also John MacKay, ed. and transl., *More West Highland Tales*, 2 vol., (Edinburgh and London: 1940), vol. 1, pp. 394-409.

[13] MacKay, p. 403.

[14] MacKay, p. 409.

There are several features in common between the Hind Girl's story in *The Bad Box* and the 'The Weaver's Son'. The two girls, although seemingly human at the end of the stories, are represented in zoomorphic shape: while the Deer Princess is herself an animal, the Hind Girl is born out of one. Moreover, the encounter between the two animal girls and the human heroes is followed by a quest: after their encounter, the Weaver's Son travels to find the Princess again, while Alec chooses to accompany the Hind Girl in her own search for her father. Finally, their happy unions, as suggested by MacKay, are ambiguous endings to the traditional tales of the marriages between humans and supernatural creatures.

Despite the immediate resemblances between the two tales, there is a fundamental difference between the two heroines. Although McKay argues that n the traditional folk tale, the Deer Princess follows her own will in marrying the Weaver's Son, the king's authority seems to be still unquestioned, as the marriage is celebrated because 'the King was very willing' (p. 407), although it is true that she appears willing to help the Weaver's Son heal after his flight to the Island, perhaps because she knows he was responsible for discharging her from the magic spell. Fell's Hind Girl, however, is a more assertive character. In charge of her own destiny from the beginning, her personality progresses towards the final emancipation from both her mother's seemingly manipulative influence and her father's authority. Her own decision to stay with Alec, her human lover, is the climax of the process of self-determination experienced throughout the story.

The traditional material employed in the creation of Isla's alter ego is thus transformed, but the question remains as to the extent to which the Hind Girl's story must be read as Isla's wilful autobiographical creation or an adaptation of tradition independent from the main narrative of *The Bad Box*. Fairy tale and dream are the two poles between which Fell places Isla's alternative world. This world unfolds in a story that follows and reflects Isla's dilemmas and inner conflicts through the creation of a fairy tale where she is author and heroine at the same time. It is because of the closeness between the two characters that

the Hind Girl's story does not offer a clear solution to her dilemma. Fell's introduction of the Hind Girl's story in the main narrative of *The Bad Box* seems to question, rather than solve the issues raised in the main realistic plot, and the Hind Girl's story does not seem to fit in Bettelheim's theories. Bettleheim was openly criticised by Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1994):

> Bettelheim, [...], discusses the fairy tale in terms of the function it can serve in 'fortifying' (the word is his) the child's personality and resolving its Oedipal drama (this the use of enchantment). [...] The unconscious does not therefore challenge the human ego, its seeming coherence and identity; the unconscious 'enriches' the ego, and, much as a quantity of energy or a current, it can be transferred into the ego where it becomes neutralised and safe.[15]

Rose's theory marks a fundamental change in fairy tale and children's fiction theory. The idea underlying Bettelheim's interpretation of fairy tales, that children's unconscious is meant to develop into a 'safely' stable entity is, according to Rose, based on an incorrect interpretation of Freudian theories of the unconscious. The need to lead children's personalities towards the goal of a coherent adult personality through the use of fairy tales is based on the absurd assumption that the human unconscious is actually a *stable* monolith and that the 'unstable' unconscious of children can be directed towards it. In fact, Rose argues, neither the adult's unconscious which is projected onto fairy tales and other forms of children's fiction, nor the language employed to create those stories are stable entities. Indeed, just like the children's unconscious to which these fictions are theoretically addressed, the adult unconscious and its language are not free from the ambiguities which Freud revealed in his psychoanalytical theories: 'For Freud, neither childhood nor meaning can be pinned down – they shift, and our own identity with them'.[16] In *The Bad Box*, Fell's employment of folk / fairy tale narrative characterisation and themes articulates conflict and leads to change, rather than reaching stability. The Hind

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[15] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 14.

[16] Rose, pp. 17-18.

Girl's state of confusion and identity-loss is a projection of Isla's (and Fell's?) confusion, between the end of her childhood dream and her entering the adult world, in a new unexplored phase of her existence. Both endings show the beginning of new journeys, with Isla setting off towards the blue sky of Edinburgh and the Hind Girl leaving her own world to embrace a new existence next to Alec, oblivious already of the world she is leaving behind: 'Ahead his parents waited impatiently, to greet them, whereas behind lay only an empty circle, and the long slow spiralling of the stones' (p. 166). Dreaming over and dilemmas solved, there is space for a new world, open to possibilities concealed in the quest author and heroine have jointly undertaken. Their expectations still seem high, as they have achieved the self-awareness they were looking for. However, their journeys are not over, as both protagonists are already projecting themselves on new chapters of their existences.

Journeys are the central motifs of *The Mistress of Lilliput or The Pursuit*, a pastiche based on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Fell's tribute to postmodernist rewriting typically establishes a dual relationship of 'attachment' and 'departure' with the hypotext. From a genre point of view, Fell's hypertext follows the lines of a non-realistic fiction set by Swift. Though *Gulliver's Travels* could not be defined as pure fantasy fiction, it is also true that Swift set his satire in several imaginary countries, whose names and inhabitants are unfamiliar to Lemuel Gulliver's eighteenth-century England. The first two parts of *Gulliver's Travels*, his voyages to the lands of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, contain non-realistic features: Lilliput is populated by small creatures, perfectly proportioned humans on a smaller scale; Brobdingnag, on the contrary, is populated by gigantic human-looking beings. In the last two parts of Swift's narrative, these imaginary elements become gradually more surreal and disturbing. In the third part of the narrative, Laputa is populated by odd-looking people whose features, vaguely human, are distorted, and, significantly, their

distortion is the result of their intellectual 'speculation';[17] in the same section, Gulliver's visit to Glubbdubdrib contains a reference to 'proper' magic, as the island is populated by a tribe of 'Magicians' (pp.163-67), who can summon up historical characters from the past; in the fourth part, perhaps still under the impression left by his trip to the Magicians' island of Glubbdubdrib, Gulliver's first notion about the country of Houyhnhnms is that its people must be 'Conjurers' (p.192). In fact, the land of Houyhnhnms is the most similar to Gulliver's homeland, and yet the most perversely dissimilar: populated by horses (Houyhnhnms) and seemingly human beings (Yahoos) the latter are held to be of a lower nature and employed to serve the former.

In a similar fashion, at times resembling a stylistic imitation of a formula, *The Mistress of Lilliput* retraces part of *Gulliver's Travels* adventures, as Mary Gulliver sets off for the South Seas and unexpectedly lands in Lilliput, as result of a shipwreck. Fell's references to the lands of Lilliput and Houyhnhnms manifest the 'attachment' to the hypotext, while the inventions of other imaginary lands, such as the island of 'Ogé', reveal the 'departure' from the original, and signal the distinctive elements of the new text.

Beside these plot details, more parallels are established between the two narratives' gender politics. The last leg of Gulliver's journey has drastic consequences on the traveller's psyche. From the moment of his landing on the shores of the new land, Gulliver finds the Yahoos rather unpleasant, though remarkably similar to the human species. After the time spent among the horse-people and his return to Redriff, Gulliver cannot tolerate his fellow human beings, including his wife and children. Instead, he favours the company of those who dwell in his stables. At the very end of his story, Gulliver's state of mind is still affected by his experiences, despite his new resolution to show tolerance towards other human beings:

> I began last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the farthest End of a long Table, and to answer (but with the utmost

[17] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) ed. by Albert J. Rivero (New York: Norton and Company, 2002), pp. 133-34. Further references to this edition are giver after quotations in the text.

> brevity) the Few Questions I ask her. Yet the Smell of a *Yahoo* continuing very offensive, I always keep my Nose well stopt with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-leaves. And although it be hard for a Man late in Life to remove old Habits, I am not altogether out of Hopes in some time to suffer a Neighbour *Yahoo* in my Company without the Apprehensions I am yet under of his Teeth or his Claws. (p. 249)

Gulliver's intolerance of his wife's company cannot be dismissed simply as the climax of a long string of misogynist comments scattered through Swift's narrative. His generalised intolerance towards all Yahoos is proved by the use of the masculine possessive – 'his Teeth or his Claws' – when referring to the Yahoo. In fact, at end of *Gulliver's Travels*, his extreme behaviour shifts towards misanthropy rather than misogyny, while, throughout the narrative, Gulliver's emotional life and his relationship to gender are dealt with extreme ambiguity. Gulliver's indifference to sensual love and intimacy at the beginning of his adventures (he does not mind leaving his newly-wed wife in order to go travelling to the South Seas) seemingly grows into a general dislike of all females. A few episodes highlight Gulliver's dislike of women, an attitude which becomes particularly manifest during his stay at Brobdingnag. Here, Gulliver's description of the Nurse's breast discloses his disgust for the gigantic female body:

> It stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in Circumference. The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hew both of that and the Dug so verified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous [...].
> (pp. 76-77)

In the lands of giants, female bodies are distorted, expressionist caricatures unpleasantly weighed down by enormous womanly attributes, and perhaps, as Laura Brown observes, 'Brobdingnag gigantism is intimately linked to misogyny'.[18] Nevertheless, subtler gender issues endorse this and other episodes with more complex significances. The giant maids turn Gulliver into an object of pleasure, half-innocently toying with his tiny body: 'Infantilized, petted, and made a public spectacle, Gulliver becomes a feminized commodity, a

[18] Laura Brown, 'Reading Race and Gender in *Gulliver's Travels*', in Swift, pp. 357-371 (359).

profitable object'.[19] In Brobdingnag, Gulliver's small body is exploited in the same fashion as a doll:

> My Mistress had a Daughter of nine Years old, a child of forward Parts for her Age, very dextrous at her Needle, and skilful in dressing her Baby. Her Mother and she contrived to fit up the Baby's Cradle for me against the Night [...]. This young Girl was so handy, that after I had once or twice pulled off my Cloths before her, she was able to dress and undress me, though I never gave her the Trouble when she should let me do either my self. She made me seven Shirts, and some other Linen of as fine Cloth as could be got; and these she constantly washed for me with her own Hands. (p. 79)

It would not be surprising if Fell's creation of the doll narrator in *The Mistress of Lilliput* was partly inspired by this episode of *Gulliver's Travels*. Transformed into toy and ambiguously manipulated by the giant child's skilful hands, Gulliver's experience in Brobdingnag is suggestive of the gender tensions contained in the narrative, which Fell adopts in her own text. Arguably, the central element of *The Mistress of Lilliput*, gender inversion seems to be crucial in *Gulliver's Travels*, too, when, in Brobdingnag, Gulliver's small size implies a partial loss of control in the presence of the opposite sex and questions the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Swift enhances this progressive feminisation of Gulliver in the last section of his travels, in the land of Houyhnhnms, where Gulliver's closest sexual encounter with a female Yahoo leaves him, again, feeling victimised by a potential sexual experience with the female Other:

> It happened that a Female Yahoo standing behind the Bank, saw the whole proceeding, and enflamed by Desire, as the Nag and I conjectured, came running with all speed, and leaped into the Water [...]. I was never in my Life so terribly frightened; She embraced after a most fulsome manner; I roared as loud as I could, and the Nag came galloping towards me, whereupon she quitted her Grasp, with the utmost Reluctance, and leaped upon the opposite Bank, where she stood gazing and howling all the time I was putting on my clothes. (p. 225)

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[19] Felicity A. Nussbaum, 'Gulliver's Malice: Gender and the Satiric Stance', in Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) (Boston: Bedford Books at St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 318-34 (p. 325).

The ambiguously sensual episodes occurred at Brobdingnag, are disturbingly mirrored in the country of Houyhnhnms, where Gulliver is turned into the object of a female Yahoo's voyeuristic gaze and sexual desire. But in the land of Houyhnhnms, Gulliver is a much weaker and humbler, 'domestic' man, 'the hero of every adventure has taken on the feminine role'.[20] Throughout his adventures, Gulliver's progressive feminisation poses questions about the position of gender and sexuality in Swift's narrative. It is in the last section of the *Travels* that Jeanette Winterson identifies the insurgence of love, emotional turmoil and passion in the previously controlled, passionless, cold-hearted, Lemuel Gulliver. Significantly, Gulliver's surrender to the emotions he nurtures for his Master is articulated almost through a gender shift, as Captain Gulliver appears suddenly 'weakened' by the insurgence of emotion. This change of direction is particularly evident, as Gulliver's ambiguous attitude towards women has oscillated between misogyny and indifference throughout the narrative.[21]

These engendered ambiguities of Swift's narrative reveal a further ambiguous link with Fell's text. Her rewriting of *Gulliver's Travels* focuses on Mary Gulliver's quest to bring back her husband who has apparently escaped to live amongst his much preferred Houhnhnms. From the suspended sexual ambiguity of *Gulliver's Travels* stems Fell's rewriting of Swift's satire from the point of view of Gulliver's wife. To accentuate the gender shift, she deliberately transforms Swift's male satirical narrative into a feminised genre, a 'romance'. By romance, in this specific context, I mean any fictional prose which, in Swift's times, would have been negatively dismissed as female reading, 'the association with the feminine indicates that prose fiction is considered 'suspiciously feminine. [...] Novels of all kinds were going to be treated more

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[20] Jeanette Winterson, 'Introduction', Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. v-xii (p. ix).

[21] See Nussbaum. See also Susan Bruce, 'The Flying Island and Female Anatomy: Gynaecology and Power in *Gulliver's Travels*', *Genders*, 2 (1988), 60-76. See also Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 31-33.

and more negatively at the mid eighteenth century'.[22] In *Gulliver's Travels* the reference to the Palace of Lilliput destroyed by a fire caused 'by the carelessness of the Maid of Honour, who fell asleep while she was reading a Romance' (46) associates romance with female reading as well as *fire*, perhaps suggesting that sensual passion is the topic of the specific romance which had engaged the Maid until late. The feminisation of romances dates back to the early seventeenth century, when a specific branch of romances, 'originally a celebration of heroism, fealty to a lord or a lady, and great deeds',[23] evolved into more popular prose genres, focussing on love and romantic stories between a man and a woman. Specific elements typical of romance literature, both in its classical and modern-popular manifestations, are interwoven in the text of *The Mistress of Lilliput*: the 'patriarchal marriage', the 'romantic quest', the 'bildungsroman' and the 'love triangle' are all components of Fell's narrative, which establishes a relationship both with the classical origins of romance and to the modern evolution of 'formula romances'.[24] Indeed *The Mistress of Lilliput* originates from the author's double intention of rewriting the eighteenth century text of *Gulliver's Travels* and to make a parody of formula romance. The different contexts of high culture – represented by primary relationship with the hypotext and the secondary references to other literary and classical texts – and popular culture – represented by the genre choice of formula romance – indicate the coexistence of the two cultural levels in the layered narrative of *The Mistress of Lilliput*.

The copious references to high culture are the result of the author's research into eighteenth century literature,[25] revealed both through open allusions and suggested hidden references to other texts. Alexander Pope's satirical poems 'occasioned by reading the travels of Captain Lemuel Gulliver', although not directly quoted in *The Mistress of Lilliput*, constitute a good

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[22] Margaret Anne Doody, 'Swift and Romance', in *Walking Naboth's Vineyard: New Studies on Swift*, ed. by Christopher Fox and Brenda Tooley (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 98-126 (99-100).

[23] Virginia Brackett, *Classic Love and Romance Literature: An Encyclopaedia of Works, Characters, Authors and Themes* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 1999), p. xi.

[24] See Brackett, pp. xiv-xv.

[25] See 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

introduction to the mood and some episodes of the romance.[26] In particular, the opening lines of the last of the four poems, 'Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver', establish the ironic tone with which Mary's sorrow is described throughout the poem:

> Welcome, thrice welcome, to thy native place!—
> What, touch me not? What, shun a wife's embrace?
> Have I for this thy tedious absence borne,
> And wak'd, and wish'd whole nights for thy return?
> In five long years I took no second spouse;
> What Redriff wife so long hath kept her vows?[27]

The focus on Mary Gulliver, the sharp ironic tones, and references to Mary's patriarchal marriage and sexual frustration are elements found in *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Pope's satirical poem reveals a misogynist vein enhanced by Mary's statements about her faithfulness during her husband's absence, producing in fact a satirical reference to women's inconsistency and impatience. As in Pope's poem, Fell also employs irony in the treatment of her heroine. Having the doll Lady Mary as first-person narrator enhances the ironic potential of the story. The adoption of the doll's perspective is crucial in the making of the novel, as Lady Mary not only impersonates the gender shift, but also subverts the ontological (and gender) hierarchy of the narrative. As Fell admits:

> I realised I had to narrate it from the point of view of the doll. She could be both the omniscient narrator and she could say all sort of things about Scottish women and their dolls... She could say the most scandalous things which I wanted to say, *because* she was at the bottom of the heap in terms of the kind of the hierarchy of oppression beloved by idiot 'identity' politics. It was my swipe at a lot of things. Once I decided on that, I could undermine the character of Mary, I could concoct a totally envious, bitchy, schizoid narration and I could discover how to go all the places I wanted her to go.[28]

Paradoxically, the doll becomes the central focus of the narrative, highlighting the enhanced surreal twist of the new text. Although Swift's narrative world

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[26] Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope*, 10 vol., ed. by Whitwell Elwin and William John Curthope (London: John Murray, 1871-1889), vol. IV, p. 504.

[27] Pope, vol. IV, p. 510.

[28] 'Interview with Alison Fell', see appendix.

could be not described as magical, in *The Mistress of Lilliput* the doll's voice is the result of magic inversion. The doll's enunciation of the story challenges the boundaries of rational thinking, shifting Gulliver's story from a satirical to a fantastic genre. Although throughout the narrative, it becomes accepted that the doll narrates the story, this represents a crucial point which justifies the ironic, mocking, playful mood of the narrative.

Through this strategy the story can begin with details about the heroine's *bildung*, only vaguely suggested in the original by Swift. The strict Presbyterian upbringing proves to be fruitless as Mary, predisposed to appreciate feminine fashion and elegance, is exposed to the temptation of the mundane world of fashion from the earliest stages of her childhood:

> Into a world of hose, then, she came, for the newborn was instantly hoisted to her father's shoulder and toured like a victor's trophy through the workshop. The first sound her tiny ears encountered was the whispering clack of the combs, and the first sight her eyes beheld was the multicoloured lengths that issued like magic snakes from the conjunction of man and machine.[29]

Bearing in mind that *The Mistress of Lilliput* is a parody of formula romance, more specifically it could be defined as an erotic historical romance, a specific category of erotic formula romances which 'borrow the conventions of historical novels to exploit the presumably tougher code of morality in the past, but they differ from other historical romances because sexuality is central to plot development'.[30] The sexual undercurrent running through the narrative of *The Mistress of Lilliput* is suggested from the early stages of the narrative. At the core of the romance of *The Mistress of Lilliput* is the sexual drive that pervades the action and is the thread that links all the episodes in *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Camouflaged as playful imagination, vividly stimulated by the 'magic' of the family hosiery business, Mary's discovery of her sensuality expresses itself in games that seem gradually less and less innocent:

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[29] Alison Fell, *The Mistress of Lilliput or The Pursuit* (London: Doubleday, 1999), p. 12. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[30] Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 41-42.

> So fertile is the infant mind, however, that even a light hearted joke may bear serious fruit. Some days later, on a visit to the nursery, Mrs Burton was shocked to discover the little girl rocking her naked rump industriously upon her close-stool, her face quite red from her happy exertions, while with her tongue she mimicked the rhythmic racket of the frames. (p. 13)

Far from the cornucopia of desire Mary had expected, her patriarchal marriage to Lemuel Gulliver proves to be a further disappointment. After confessing to her spouse her enjoyment of his company in the alcove, Mary's timid attempt to prolong such pleasures finds that 'his stern frown alone would have convinced her of the immodesty of her proposal' (p. 31). The strength of her repressed sexual desire and her bodily awareness are constant reminders of the central role played by sensuality in *The Mistress of Lilliput*. The narrative reinforces the gendered perspective through the doll's ironic comments, as Mary attempts to understand her husband's passion for travelling on a visit to his study:

> Attentive as she was, like many of her sex my mistress was more interested in the mysterious continents of her own nature than in regions farther flung; in this matter, thinking to find a fellow-mariner with whom to pore over her charts and align her sextant to the angle of the stars, she had, for better or worse, appointed Mr Gulliver the Captain of her Heart. (p. 35)

Mary embarks on a perilous journey to bring her husband back to his place next to his devoted – albeit sexually frustrated – wife. Several elements indicate that Mary's adventure is a journey towards self-determination. During her time away from the homeland's social boundaries, Mary undergoes irreversible psychological and physical changes. Dating back to her childhood, references to strong female fictional, mythological and real characters are encrypted in the names of her dolls, Charlotte, Belinda, Aretusa, and 'her favourite' Lady Mary, likely references to Charlotte Brontë, Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, the heroic Greek nymph Aretusa, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Likewise, during her cruise to the South Seas, recurring allusions to and quotations from the classical world – Homer, Aristotle, Hesiod, Plato, Plotinus, Anaxagoras, Artemidorus – manifest a desire for intellectual knowledge that Mary can fulfil only away from her homeland, home duties, a social context that

would not encourage her education, and a husband who has barred her from his study. Her personality, up until now moulded and censored by the role assigned to her gender, is already, slowly but steadily, evolving into something different.

Interwoven with the *bildungsroman*, is the romantic / erotic story of Mary's sexual development. It is not a coincidence that the ship is named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love:

> I strove to keep a clear head to puzzle over the problem of the two Aphrodites, as posed by Pausanius. In Plato's opinion it is the elder who is named the Heavenly. Whereas the younger Aphrodite, who is the daughter of both Zeus and Dione, is called common, and the Love who is her fellow-worker is also called common, moving as it does the meaner sort of men, who are apt to love the body rather than the soul... (p. 69)

This and other references to the Greek myth of Aphrodite and the classical debates over the goddess's birth and naming, discovered through Mary's curiosity about the name of the ship, indicates that the path towards Mary's self-determination is primarily led by her sexual emancipation in the appropriate genre of romance narrative. If classical philosophers may satisfy her underfed psyche, her body requires at least the same degree of attention, having been neglected by an absent husband for too long. The co-habitation with the sailors acts as a catalyst on Mary's repressed appetite. A manifestation of Mary's hidden distress is channelled through her subconscious: despite her attempt to repress her 'tempestuous thoughts', her dreams reveal her current disposition. The explanation of one of them, again referring to classic philosophy through Artemidorus's words, discloses the storm lurking behind the apparent calm of the sea surface: 'To a young man this dream means love of a delightful woman; to a woman, however, it represents the dissolute life of the body, for the sea is like to a harlot, which hath a fair appearance but in the end brings many to evil' (p. 72). Ironically, the arrival of the sexual storm is anticipated by the lustful behaviour of the doll narrator, who takes advantage of a sunny day to become the spectator of the abundance of bodies around the deck of the ship:

> Presented with such generous fare, I was quite overcome with excitement, my lips bone dry, my cheeks flushed up like autumn apples, and while my eye ransacked the feast spread before me, my heart was far too hungry to discriminate, and suffered the same painful indecision. (p. 81)

The doll's reflections set the mood for subsequent events. The ship is wrecked by an actual storm and Mary, with her inseparable companion, is washed ashore on the island of Lilliput, where the tiny inhabitants capture the dangerous giantess. The doll, however, follows a different path: her size and perfect proportions to the Lilliputians' standards gain her a divine status and permanent residency in a temple where she is worshipped by the locals.

Mary's experiences in Lilliput reflect Lemuel Gulliver's adventure in Brobdingnag as in a *camera obscura*. Everything is inverted: in place of a male hero is a female heroine, in place of the giants are tiny Lilliputians. Like Gulliver in Brobdingnag, however, Lilliput discriminates against Mary because of her size. This reinforces the hierarchical subversion already operated by the choice of the doll narrator. Whereas the doll is worshipped as a goddess, Mary's body is victimised and immobilised by her size, ironically splitting the two connotations of the goddess Aphrodite already mentioned above:

> Consider the contrariness of the fate which had been reserved for myself and my mistress: to be split asunder like the two Aphrodites, the one endowed by her faithful followers with the numinous wisdom of a Sophia, the other licensed by State decree as a Palace in which less devout citizens might indulge profaner appetites. (p. 120)

While Lady Mary sits on her throne and is finally enjoying an independent life, Mary becomes the passive recipient of the Lilliputians' cares. Once again, Mary's experience in Lilliput is an inverse reflection of Gulliver's adventure, whereas in Brobdingnag, the objectified Gulliver was dressed and undressed by his Master's child, in Lilliput, Mary is passively looked after by a regiment of chambermaids who sew her a dress and then cover her body with it. The constant proximity with the giantess creates a kind of camaraderie between the chambermaids and their 'large doll', who they look after and protect with extra care.

But Lilliput hides further surprises for the heroine of *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Mary's body is about to be turned into a 'Popular Pleasure Palace', when the Queen Bee Society conceives a slightly different experiment. Originally named 'The Gentleman's Supper Club', this group of male Lilliputians, vaguely reminiscent of some Sadeian characters, is devoted to the pleasures of sex. In a reverse parody of Gulliver's sexual dislike for the giant female bodies in Brobdingnag, to the members of the Queen Bee Society the giant body landed ashore constitutes the ultimate sexual challenge. Their interest, stirred by the sizeable proportions of Mary's genitalia, is manifested firstly as a scientific curiosity. The first task, the heroic exploration of the giantess's sexual organs, is performed by the president Edesad (an anagram of 'De Sade'): 'Presently his eyes adjusted to the dimness, and when he saw the infernal colours of the place, its pinks and purples, crimsons and carmines, he thought he had been swallowed up by the mouth of Hell itself' (p. 139). Magnified by gigantic proportions, the organs of pleasure are distorted into a surreal Hellish scenario. Edesad's frightening experience of Mary's anatomy is enriched by classical references to mythological monsters: 'Weak-limbed and divided against himself, the champion sank down against the slippery sides, certain that he had glimpsed in the abyss the horrible head of a Gorgon, and he with no shining shield to counter its accusing gaze' (pp. 140-141). The reference to the gorgon suggests the assimilation of Mary Gulliver to the archetypal dangerous woman, as her frighteningly large female attributes symbolise her empowered position. The mythological reference also stresses the irony of the episode. Edesad, a reincarnated Ulysses or Herakles, embarks on the difficult task to discover the deepest secrets of a woman's pleasure. In the romance formula of *The Mistress of Lilliput*, Edesad is the *villain*, while the Lilliputian's attempt to violate Mary's body and give her pleasure is ironically set against Gulliver's puritanical attitude towards sexuality and his misogyny. Before Mary's unaware eyes, a new world is approaching faster and faster. After repeated endeavours, the Queen Bee Society succeeds in devising the object to open the doors of Mary's desire (and, it would appear, her first

orgasm). When the ingeniously stuffed manatee starts to stroke Mary's unaware body, an overwhelming experience takes place in front of the Lilliputian voyeurs. As for Mary, her reaction is an increasing paroxysm of new emotions:

> If the incursions of the Queen Bee Club had made a negligible impact, here she encountered a first-rate fit, slick and sizeable, and no sooner had the device advanced that it retreated, and then, relinquished, was restored again, and famously received, till Manatee and matron rocked not recklessly but with the rhyme and reason of a piston driven by an engine, back and forth, with such a clack and clatter that she might have thought herself a child again, encompassed by the hectic rhythm of machines. (pp. 160-161)

The sexual pleasure experienced through the Queen Bee Society's imaginative creation brings back memories from childhood, to the age of happiness, before Mary's sensuality was repressed by her mother's prudish upbringing and 'frozen' by her husband's frigidity. Inevitably, the novelty of the extraordinary physical sensations has an impact on the character's psyche. For a moment, isolation, captivity and a far away husband cease to matter to Mary's fulfilled body.

The importance of Mary's sexual awakening is also reinforced by the coexistence of a parallel story in the narrative. From the beginning of Lady Mary's memoirs, readers have been alerted by sources external to the doll's narrative. The correspondence between French botanist Antoine Duchesne and Mr Moll (a friend to Mr and Mrs Gulliver) reveals the potential for the love triangle and the expected romantic evolution of the story. When Antoine discovers that his experiments on Chilean strawberries cannot lead to reproduction because the plants are not hermaphrodite, his distress is an ironic manifestation of his passionate personality, and suggestive of his role as the *romance hero*: 'I sulked like a jilted lover; I took no food for days. But finally, impelled by Cupid's dart you might say, I saw that the mountain must go to Mahomet, and directly took the ship from St. Malo'. (p. 68) Inflamed by the passion that had started his journey from France to the South Seas, Antoine is

about to find there is more to his botanical quest than a female strawberry plant. His voyage will soon take the contours of a *romantic quest*.

His encounter with Mary seems, from the start, love at first sight. When Mary is sick, his tender care is described in terms of romance parody, which foretells the happy ending of the story: 'So remorseful was Monsieur Antoine that he was happy to pay the custodian handsomely for half a cup, which he administered on bended knee, holding her head, till she had sipped it all down like a strawberry plant' (p. 293). The sensual tones of the episode indicate the route Mary is about to take. When finally reunited with her husband, who lives in the adjacent island of Ogé (the reverse of Ego), she is only half disappointed to discover he is too busy in his insane experiments to show her any affection: 'On not a single graph was *Wife* inscribed or *love* or *loneliness*, so single-minded was this sovereign of the void' (p. 320). Mary's decision not to return to England and the prospect of a new life with a different man in a foreign country reveal the changes undergone throughout her adventurous journey, and her ultimate desire to assert her own self, as she deserts her lawful husband with these words: 'I fear I am not as you would have me be, for I am not fit to fetch and carry, or serve you faithfully' (p. 334).

Further sexual innuendoes are disclosed in a double happy ending. Mary's smuggling of Antoine's strawberries inside the doll's 'most intimate seam' (p. 345), as well as creating further irony, offers a conclusion to the gender issues scattered throughout the narrative:

> I bore the veritable sire and dam within me, cradled in a bed of straw, and though it is not given me to procreate as women do, I leave it to you, good ladies, to decide the meaning of fecundity, define its length, breadth, extend its provinces and colonies, and draw its boundaries beyond our present ken. (p. 348)

The doll, the objectified symbol of motherhood for young girls of all eras, is paradoxically allowed to procreate and questions the limits imposed on the concept of 'fertility'. By challenging the biological and rational boundaries of the reproductive process – a persistent theme since the beginning of Antoine's botanical quest – Lady Mary overcomes her jealousy towards Mary and women

in general. Not long before this, her reproach about leaving Lilliput for Mary's sake, had been expressed in an ironic row against all womanhood, echoing Swift's misogynist comments often mouthed by Lemuel Gulliver. However, Lady Mary goes further in her critique of the female sex:

> Bloated daxies; primps and simperers; fat harridans; wadding witches; bitches; back stabbers; slappers and grabbers; cock grinders; shit-picklers; man-trappers; gin swillers; church sniffers; ass-pizzles; child beaters; cesspools and sophists; eunuchs; bawds; ball-bags; pleaders and piners; lice and leeches; tyrants and termagants; thumb-screwers; cream-curdlers, bleeders and sob-squeezers! (p. 221)

From the female-gendered mouth of a girl's companion, these vehement comments acquire more than an ironic twist. Women are nothing but moaning creatures governed by their physical appetites: the doll's subversive speech takes on misogynist stereotypes to reinforce the physical, sensual and sexual undercurrent of the whole narrative, while apparently making satirical remarks on women's pettiness. But the romance's inevitable happy ending sees both the female protagonists successfully set in their new lives. In an ironic inversion of the story of Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Mary, born in love-deprived, post-Knox Scotland, also finds a new home and a mistress in the land of romance, France:

> Reader, if the Queen of Scots began her life as a *Marie* and ended it more drearily as *Mary*, my fate was to be the converse, for having disembarked at Le Havre, and subsequently journeyed south to the Duchesne estates at Solutré, I was surrendered to the care of Monsieur Antoine's little ward Céleste, the daughter of his widowed sister Marguerite. Her eyes were blue and limpid as her name, and her heart unclouded by the bitter legacy of black-browed Mr Knox, whose trumpetings unthroned an earthly queen and sought to tear the very name of woman from the heavens. (p. 350)

The affirmation of the female gender thus epitomises the narrative with a political statement. At the end of *The Mistress of Lilliput* both Lady Mary and Mary herself have successfully overcome the barriers imposed on them by the patriarchal society. On the other hand, both Lemuel Gulliver and John Knox remain faint memories of that patriarchal society. Having left those chains behind, Mary and her doll set the story towards its foreseen happy ending.

Fell's pastiche based on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, interweaves a number of transtextual and fictional references from classical mythographers and philosophers – Plato, Hesiod, Ovid, Homer – and from eighteenth century tradition of British Literature – Swift, Dryden, Burton. To the gender shift expressed by the female point of view, corresponds a genre shift, as Fell transforms Swift's satire into a romance. Within the romance, sensual passion and physical attraction are the primary drives which run through all the episodes and parallel stories of *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Mary embarks on her voyage as a love quest; similarly, Antoine leaves France in search for a suitable match for his strawberry plants. Romance and sexual attraction stir the actions of all characters. Lady Mary flirts with the sailors and then ends up being worshipped by the Lilliputians as a goddess of beauty; Bluebottle, the black sailor from the *Aphrodite*, falls in love with a Lilliputian girl who rejects him because of his size; conversely, Mary becomes the sexual object of the Queen Bee Society in Lilliput, a club whose members develop an obsession about the giantess's body. A parody of a romance, *The Mistress of Lilliput*'s irony is a pervasive force within the narrative. Although it is a pastiche of *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Mistress of Lilliput* is also a parody of specific formulas of feminised romances. The irony is conveyed primarily by the coexistence of two cultural contexts – high and popular culture – which the narrative is constantly referring to. The popular formula romance is embedded with references to classical philosophers and thinkers. The dissonance is the result of Fell's clever experimenting with hypertextuality, in the form of a pastiche of a hypotext (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*), which simultaneously becomes a parody of a genre (formula romance).

In *The Mistress of Lilliput*, the doll's narrative performance strengthens the ironic tone of the parody. From the paradoxical perspective of her inanimate existence, she embodies the subversion of hierarchies at the core of the narrative, as the doll reinforces in one of her editorial addresses to the readers:

> Do not think for a moment, reader, that a doll is a mere manikin without eyes to see and ears to hear, nor that her humble status

> dooms her to dimwittedness. On the contrary, her very lowliness, as you will see, assures her of a privileged understanding. (p.14)

As well as 'ears' and 'eyes', Lady Mary seemingly boasts a 'brain' and, at least, a metaphorical 'mouth' through which the story is enunciated. As well as contributing to the ironic engendered narrative of *The Mistress of Lilliput*, the paradoxical inversion of points of view endorsed by the talking (and thinking) doll) highlights the magic of *The Mistress of Lilliput*. Not only does it enhances the subversion of gender politics – female over male – but also, Lady Mary's ironic narrative inverts the logic ontological order of things – inanimate over animate – throughout the romance. In *The Mistress of Lilliput*, inversion, one of the three narrative strategies of magic, is primarily the consequence of the subversive tale of a doll, which questions, from the beginning, boundaries of genre, gender, and belief.

From the increasing use of distortion and surrealism in the first two works mentioned in this chapter, *Every Move You Make* and *Mer De Glace*, Fell's magic turns into a more persistent and complex component in *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput*. From an ontological point of view, magic becomes more and more an immanent part of the real worlds described in the narratives and therefore questions the boundaries of rational thinking and of strictly realistic narratives. Dreams, hallucinations and visions become the lenses that filter focus, and inevitably distort reality. Magical creatures and surreal worlds coexist and subvert the hypothetical logical structure of realistic plots.

The manipulation of traditional fairy tale and formula romance, the use of transtextual allusions, quotations and the hypertextual links established with specific references, layer the narrative structures of Fell's oneiric fantasies and magical journeys. The fragmented narrative structures of *The Bad Box* and *The Mistress of Lilliput* are indicative of the schizoid voices which speak simultaneously and dissonantly in the texts. What the Hind girl is to Isla, Lady Mary is to Mary Gulliver: both narratives employ dual points of view to reinforce the semantic polyvalence of the narratives. In *The Bad Box* the creation of an

alter ego deconstructs the realistic plot of Isla's story and questions the boundaries between the reality and fantasy throughout the novel. Similarly, in *The Mistress of Lilliput* the doll's narrative subverts ontological and political hierarchies, undermines Mary's authorial power and establishes the ironic parody of genre. It is the distortions that the Hind Girl and the doll embody, which reveal the intrusion of magic and its subversive function within the 'real' worlds of the narratives.

The insertion of magic causes dynamic metamorphoses at two levels. First, from the inner conflicts always at the core of Fell's stories,[31] characters undergo transformations, which reflect Fell's focus on gender and her interest in (early) feminist theories. In her words: 'My writing originates from very deep conflicts. If there is a difficult thing in life I will home in on it. With my women characters I find myself writing about pressures or things I feel they are taboo, not to be spoken of'.[32] Both Isla and Mary appear radically changed at the end of their stories. Far from being casual, these changes are the results of the characters' struggles to accept the conflicting forces of the 'real' world, find the strength to survive in it and the freedom to change it into something they can enjoy. Isolated and frustrated at the beginning, Isla and Mary turn themselves into assertive, self-confident and positive thinking women.

Secondly, textual metamorphoses become visible tools in Fell's narratives. Her transtextual employment of Celtic folk tales 'in *The Bad Box* viewed in the light of fairy tale theories, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in the romance parody of *The Mistress of Lilliput* reinforces the concept of transformation. Different texts and genres are brought together in Fell's narratives to create polyvalent, fragmented, dissociated narratives. From the clashing dissonance of distinctive voices stem the dynamic transformations brought by oneiric fantasies and magical journeys. Dreams might not always come true and voyages might be detoured, but metamorphoses do take place while genre and gender conventions are defied, challenged and transformed.

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[31] See 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.
[32] See 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

Chapter Four

Surfacing into the Real World: Conflicts and Identity Quests in Sian Hayton's Fiction

A labyrinth of celled
And waxen pain.
Yet I come to the honeycomb often, to sip the finished
Fragrance of men.

(George McKay Brown, from 'Kirkyard')

Surfacing into the Real World: Conflicts and Identity Quests in Sian Hayton's Fiction

The themes of conflict and quest run deeply through all of Sian Hayton's fiction. Everything is juxtaposed, split and fragmented. Her novels combine psychoanalysis and ancient superstitions, dream and reality, rationality and myth. Even more than in Margaret Elphinstone and Alison Fell's fictions, in Hayton's texts magic is an immanent force, and its intrusions in historical / realistic narratives challenges the boundaries between realism and fantasy. As genre boundaries fluctuate, so are gender roles and identities challenged: patriarchy stands against matriarchy in a changing system of cultural, social and religious beliefs. The ontological, political and psychological conflicts at the core of Hayton's *Trilogy* (1989, 1992, 1993) and *The Governors* (1992) are articulated through the use of three magical tropes, the dangerous woman, the magical journey and the double.

In the *Trilogy* the giant Usbathaden's daughters are quintessentially dangerous women. Semi-mortal, skilled sorceresses and gifted with supernatural powers, they constitute a threat at many levels, as they challenge rational thinking, Christian beliefs and gender hierarchy in the human world; the various conflicts at the core of the *Trilogy* are manifested through the various dual oppositions which run through the narratives and are embodied in the use of paratextual strategies in the forms of fictional glosses which fragment the text and undermine the main text's narrative authority. Partly to overcome some of the conflicts, quests become crucial movements: the human and the giant's worlds both face challenges as a result of the journeys.

In *The Governors*, the conflict assumes a psychological dimension. Hesione, Hester's alter ego in *The Governors*, although not a witch, represents a subversive inner twin, whose identity Hester adopts to explore the taboos of

her existence. The creation of Hesione merges the tropes of the double, the dangerous woman and the magical journey, as it is through her persona that the narrow boundaries of the real world lower in a magical descent into Hester's subconscious. As in the *Trilogy*, the schizoid duality of the main narrative is also reinforced by the intrusions of a secondary narrative, differentiated from the primary narrative through the use of distinctive paratextual interface.

The presence of various narrative levels in Hayton's fiction is also accompanied by an intensive use of transtextuality. As seen in Elphinstone's work, historical and folk traditions are adopted as a background to the fiction. Both her *Trilogy — Cells of Knowledge*, *Hidden Daughters*, *The Last Flight* — and *The Governors* reveal the author's fascination with historical and popular traditions. Whether the narratives are set in the Celtic world of tenth-century Scotland, Ireland and Iceland, or contemporary Scotland, folk and historical traditions lie beneath plots and characterisation. Hayton's fascination with themes and characters derived from medieval history, Arthurian legends and other Celtic supernatural sets of legends manifests itself in the references to medieval place names (of which she gives a full list at the end of *Cells of Knowledge*), historical facts (the Viking raids, the conflicts within the Catholic Church) and the constant presence of supernatural characters and beliefs derived by those background texts.

Similarly, elements derived from myth and folk tradition are concealed in the contemporary setting of *The Governors*. The main character's name, Hesione, is borrowed from a classical Greek legend. The significance of Hesione's mythical name plays a pivotal role in the development of her story. Elements of Celtic beliefs and customs are also embodied in the narrative: references to Celtic festivals such as *Samhain* (the equivalent of the modern Halloween) and Scottish superstitions are scattered throughout the text. Furthermore, the story is strongly influenced by Celtic selkie-lore and beliefs. The relevance of these references is crucial to solve the mystery of the psychological traumas at the core of *The Governors*. The coexistence of psychoanalysis and superstition so central in *The Governors* constitutes a

second point of interest in Hayton's use of transtextuality. Her interest in psychoanalytical theories, dream interpretation and the notion of the collective unconscious, are exemplified by the references to Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung in the text of *The Governors*. In the end, the joint perspective provided by superstition and psychoanalysis solves the enigma of Hester / Hesione's doppelgänger.

The conflicting relationship between (psychological) phantasy and (supernatural) fantasy in *The Governors* is comparable to the ontological and metaphysical conflicts between Christian dogmas and the giant's demonic presence in the *Trilogy*. Jointly, the monks' presumed rationality and Christian doctrines attempt to control the irrationality and pagan beliefs of Usbathaden's world. The tension between the two sets of beliefs and forms of knowledge is the most intriguing element of Hayton's *Trilogy*, while the author's attempt to show more than one view creates a complex narrative. Readers are challenged to examine and choose what they want to believe and interpretation often becomes a matter of being able to accept alternative beliefs. The process implies the compromise between the desire to comprehend and the need to control.

In the *Trilogy* the ontological conflict between the two worlds also reflects a gender issue. The strong women of the *Trilogy* are nonetheless subordinated by their father's overwhelming authority and control. Forbidden to see the world outside of Usbathaden's fortress, the giant's daughters are victimised objects of an extreme patriarchal order. Despite their physical imprisonment and psychological entrapment, Marighal, Barve, Olwen and Essullt find the strength to react and finally become aware of their isolated life in the magical fortress. After their escape from the fortress, they finally discover that the human world is worth exploring. Having challenged their own state of affairs, they also defy the patriarchal order represented by the Christian monks' laws and become a threat to their beliefs and preconceptions. The rebellion against Usbathaden, and the problematic relationships established with the warriors and the monks are all part of the gender conflict that runs through the *Trilogy*.

In *The Governors*, the gender conflict is internalised in the psychological dimension of the narrative. Hester's traumas manifest themselves in her inability to accept her body and gender. The problematic gender identity triggers a conflict between the character and her partner: Hester's frustrated sexuality fails to establish a bond with her husband. Only the surreal experience of Hesione's cognitive journey and the projection of her self into a kind of alter ego can lead to Hester's recuperation of her self and her gendered identity.

From the interaction of history and folk tradition, myth and psychoanalysis, realism and fantasy, conflict arises as one of the most crucial themes in Hayton's fiction. This conflict might involve physical engagement and violent action but it is essentially a conflict of ideologies and systems of beliefs. Different beliefs, genders and genres are juxtaposed and throughout the narratives they find new ways to coexist. In the enigmatic end to *The Last Flight*, the third part of the *Trilogy*, Essullt's double union with her human husband and her semi-human nephew, constitutes a partial conclusion to the mighty conflicts of the three narratives. Similarly, the conflict between the pagan world and Christianity, myth and reality, woman and man find a solution at the end of Hesione's story in *The Governors*. Though eventually conflicts are partly solved, the path towards their solutions is not easy. In fact, both in the *Trilogy* and *The Governors*, characters struggle, suffer and at times perish in the attempt to survive the conflicts of their worlds. Nonetheless, their battles do not happen in vain. The conclusions to their adventurous quests suggest the possibility of overcoming conflicts and the achievement of their freedom. The importance of the magical voyages suggests the relevance of the quest motif in *Cells of Knowledge* and throughout the *Trilogy*.[1] Likewise, Hesione's surreal quest constitutes the core of the self-awareness process in *The Governors*. Without journeys, Hayton seems to suggest, change does not take place. Without changes existence would be an eternal, stagnant dimension, devoid of meaning and purpose.

[1] See Elphinstone 1995, p. 107.

The coexistence of a plurality of voices is at the origin of the *Trilogy*. Several of the magical episodes in the *Trilogy* reveal close links to the Celtic tradition in Scotland and Wales.[2] The daughters of the Giant Usbathaden all bear names evocative of a legendary past: the giant himself, one of his daughters, Olwen and her husband Culhuch (or Culhwch in the Welsh tradition) all derive from the Welsh tradition: the giant Yspaddaden (or Ysbaddaden) is Olwen's father in 'Culhwch and Olwen',[3] the Welsh version of an international traditional folk tale known as 'The Giant's Daughter'.[4] Yspaddaden, Culhwch and Olwen do not appear in any other earlier text of the Celtic/Welsh tradition. This and other facts have led scholars to date 'Culhwch and Olwen' around 1100 AD, making it the oldest tale of the Arthurian cycle.[5] The tale is found in *The Mabinogion*, the oldest collection of medieval Welsh tales. Several of the stories from *The Mabinogion* contain names found in Hayton's narratives: Kigva and Rhiannon are characters from 'Manawydan Son of Llyr'; two ladies named Essyllt are listed among the 'gentle gold-torqued women' invoked by Culhwch to persuade Arthur to fight for him against Yspaddaden in 'Culhwch and Olwen'; Branwen appears in 'Branwen Daughter of Llyr'. In addition to the references to names and the romance between the two main characters, the author has borrowed the general idea of the tasks set by the giant to defeat his daughter's suitor from 'Culhwch and Olwen'. As summarised by Bromwich and Evans:

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[2] See Douglas Gifford, 'Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland', in A *History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 604-29 (pp. 613-15). See also Margaret Elphinstone, 'The Quest. Two Contemporary Adventures', in *Gendering The Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 107-136 (p. 108).

[3] See Peter Berresford Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (London: Constable, 1992), pp. 223-224. See also Miranda Jane Green, *Celtic Myths* (London: British Museum Press, 1993), pp. 35-36.

[4] See Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, eds., *Culhwuch and Olwen. An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. xxvi. Stith Thompson and Antti Aarne classify this tale as 'Six go through the whole world' (no. 513A) under folktales of supernatural helpers. See Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1946), p. 54, p. 280. See also Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography*, transl. by Stith Thompson (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1964), p. 181.

[5] See Bromwich and Evans, p. lxxxi.

> In stories of this kind the hero succeeds in accomplishing a number of apparently impossible tasks, placed as calculated impediments in his way by a giant who knows that he himself is fated to die when the daughter marries, and therefore he will be prepared to do all he can to prevent her marriage taking place.[6]

Hayton has borrowed other elements from the Welsh tale. Both in the *Mabinogion* and in the *Trilogy*, Culhuch's father's name was Kilidh; his mother has died and has been substituted by an evil stepmother who sought revenge against the giant (see Kigva's story, below). Furthermore, Culhuch's name relates to his birth in a pigsty both in Hayton's first novel and in the traditional tale. As we read in *Cells of Knowledge*: 'When she found she was with child and that her dishonour would be shown to all the world by my birth she ran frantic into the forest. There she stayed, insane, till I was born, and she brought me into the world in a pigsty'.[7] Another version of Culhuch's story, however, is given in *Hidden Daughters* by his mother Kigva, who refers to pigs as a metaphor for the humiliating treatment she had to suffer during her pregnancy: 'Like the pigs she was tethered to the house by her ankle and like the pigs also she was contented to stay that way till her delivery'.[8] One last piece of evidence of Hayton's borrowing from 'Culhwch and Olwen' is the description of Olwen. This passage from the traditional tale recalls the fair creature of Hayton's narratives:

> Yellower was her head than the flower of the broom, whiter was her flesh than the foam of the wave; whiter were her palms and her fingers than the shoots of the marsh trefoil from amidst the fine gravel of a welling spring. Neither the eye of the mewed hawk, nor the eye of the thrice-mewed falcon, not an eye was there fairer than hers. Whiter were her breasts than the breast of the white swan, redder were her cheeks than the reddest of foxgloves. Whoso beheld her would be filled with love of her. Four white trefoils sprang up behind her wherever she went; and for that reason she was called Olwen.[9]

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[6] Bromwich and Evans, p. xxvi.

[7] Sian Hayton, *Cells of Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), p. 148. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. Compare with: 'The boy was baptized, and the name Culhwch given to him because he was found in a pig-run', 'Culhwuch and Olwen', in *The Mabinogion* ed. and transl. by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 95. Welsh 'hwch' was interpreted as pig in the manuscript of 'Culhwuch and Olwen'. See Bromwich and Evans, p. xxx.

[8] Sian Hayton, *Hidden Daughters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), p. 28. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[9] *Culhwuch and Olwen*, p. 93.

Olwen's physical description in the original tale is strongly evocative of the character Hayton adopts from tradition: her fair beauty inspires the purity of feelings she embodies in the *Trilogy*. Her description in *Hidden Daughters* bears remarkable resemblance to the traditional tale, and almost constitutes a deliberate plagiarism of the previous text: 'My sister's name is Olwen, and she is the most beautiful of all my family. She has skin as white as the drifting snow and her hair is white-gold like the sun at noon. Her eyes are as grey as the ice on the river and she carries herself as proudly as a swan' (p.141).

Beside the direct influence of the Arthurian tale of 'Culhwch and Olwen' and other references to the *Mabinogion*, Hayton has adopted traditional material from other Celtic sources. In particular, the tale of 'The Battle of the Birds'[10] is central to Marighal's story in *Cells of Knowledge*. The contrast between the love of the giant for his daughter and that of the suitor for the same woman is a universal topic in folk tales across the world, and this is the central motif of both stories. Similarly, the three tasks the giant imposes on the suitor are identical in both narratives and so is the giant's daughter's magical intervention to rescue her husband-to-be. Finally, the sinister detail about Marighal's mutilated little finger in *Cells of Knowledge* also derives from 'The Battle of the Birds'.

[10] See 'The Battle of the Birds', *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, ed. by J. F. Campbell (London: Alexander Gardner, 1890), vol. 1, pp. 25-63.

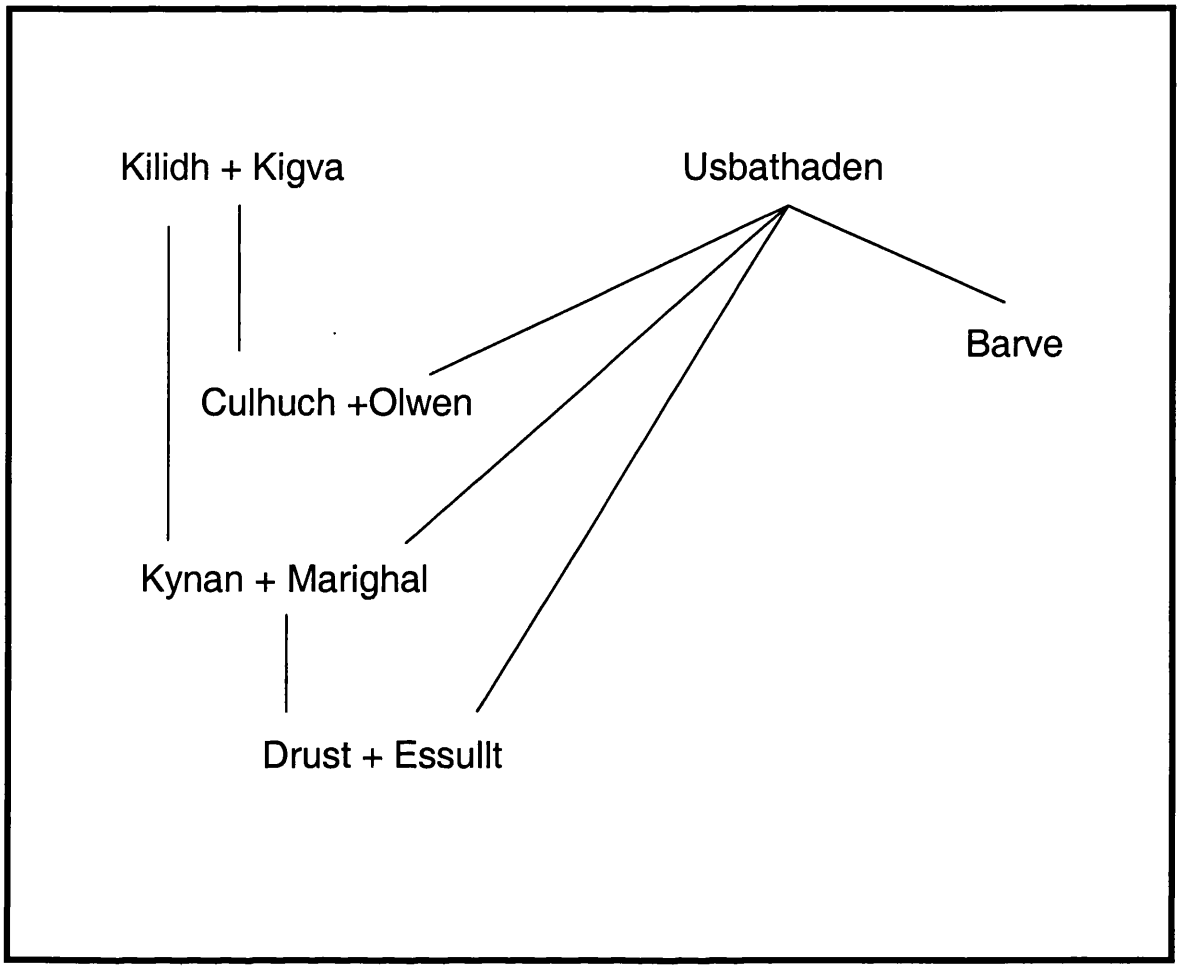

Fig. 1. Genealogy of main characters in Sian Hayton's *Trilogy*.

The plurality of transtextual references to previous texts, topics and characters, and the coexistence of historical and supernatural elements, emphasise the central theme that runs through the *Trilogy*: conflict. The *Trilogy* presents several juxtapositions: clashing points of view, history and myth, Christian religion and pagan magic, women and men. Narrative structure, genre, belief and gender are all areas of conflict throughout the *Trilogy*. For the purpose of this analysis, three main areas of conflict have been identified: the coexistence of different narrators, the juxtaposition between the pagan and the Christian world and the division between genders. The boundaries among the three areas of conflict are often subtle as these are not independent motifs in the stories. In fact, the three sets of conflicts often overlap: the clashing points of view in the narratives echo the voices from the pagan / magical and Christian / rational worlds, and, simultaneously, articulate the disagreeing male / female perspectives.

The first area of conflict in the *Trilogy* is expressed by the fragmented structure of the narratives. In *Cells of Knowledge* the letters sent by Selyf, monk at Rintsnoc (Portpatrick) to the Bishop of Alban (Scotland) and the Abbot Gwydion, constitute the main narrative. In his letters, Selyf introduces other first-person narrators: two of the giant's daughters, Marighal and Evabyth, and the giant's foster son, Kynan. His own son Hw, who has been studying them to defend his father and the monks' order from the accusation of heresy, has also glossed Selyf's letters. In *Hidden Daughters*, Hw takes over the narrative through his own letters describing his adventures with Barve, another of the giant's daughters. Like his father's, Hw's letters are also accompanied by a commentary put together by a third monk, Josiah. Again, as in *Cells of Knowledge*, Hw's first person narrative is often interrupted to incorporate other voices: Barve and Olwen both share their stories with the monk. In *The Last Flight*, Josiah's narrative takes the form of an investigation. Acting as an editor, Josiah collects five first-person narratives, different versions of the same story,

as they are told by the characters involved: Guaire, Branwen, Drust, March and Essullt.

In addition to this complex narrative structure, the main narratives of *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters* are preceded by two folk tale narratives. These explain how Culhuch was born out of wedlock from the union of Kigva and Kilidh. The story, told through Kilidh's point of view in the first novel and through Kigva's in the second, seems independent from the main narrative. Only when readers have read the first two novels of the *Trilogy*, is it possible to establish the connection between the apparently disjointed pieces of narratives, as Kilidh's two sons, Kynan and Culhuch play crucial roles in the story of the giant Usbathaden and his daughters. The coexistence of so many narratives and points of view creates an effect of fragmentation. Although the monks' points of view attribute a realistic and historical value to the stories narrated, their narrative reliability is also undermined by the other monks' glosses which effectively criticise their texts. Furthermore, the giant's daughters intrude in their narratives and fragment the unity of their texts, as 'the marginalia suggests that in Hayton's re-vision of the past it is the male voice and text which is marginalised, with the female action for once holding centre, stage and page'.[11]

The second area of conflict in the *Trilogy* is the coexistence of two worlds: the historical and the magical worlds. The historical frame based on the early stages of Christianity in Scotland in the tenth century is questioned by the supernatural elements contained in the narratives. The giant has been living since the beginning of the world and his daughters are able to reincarnate their selves in different bodies, generation after generation. Usbathaden and his daughters challenge a rational understanding of time. Time is not a human, mortal, dimension. In fact, to the immortal giant and his semi-mortal daughters time is simply an eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

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[11] Gifford 'Contemporary Fictions II', p. 613.

The magical dimension the giant and his daughters inhabit clashes with the historical world the monks represent. This conflict is one that remains vital until the very end of the *Trilogy*. In the last section of *The Last Flight*, the magical and the human worlds are merged through the union between Essullt and her nephew Drust. Although the incestuous relationship goes against the laws of nature, it is accepted with a coalescence of fear and wonder in the mythical frame of *The Last Flight*: 'as we watched fascinated, their bodies fused until what lay on the couch under the dome was a two-headed hermaphrodite. When the fusion was complete the dome glowed with blue light, and we were afraid'. As Marighal explains, there will never be a child from their unnatural union and yet, it is necessary that they stay together 'or the world will be destroyed within the year'.[12] The mythical aura that pervades Essullt and Drust's union is also emphasised by its ritualistic function: they are the preservers of humankind and the world and their union ensures the world's continuity.

The two conflicting worlds are represented through two main points of view, that of the giant's daughters and that of the Christian monks. Their encounter has been caused by Marighal's rebellion against her father's will. Although Marighal has attempted to open a door onto the human world and out of her father's fortress through her union with Kynan, her escape has not changed her nature. She is and will always remain the giant's daughter, a supernatural creature capable, like all her sisters, of transforming herself into other living creatures. She is stronger than any mortal man and causes fear among the monks when she can carry heavy rocks from the sea to the monastery. Marighal is a skilled sorceress and shows powers that Hw is very suspicious of. Similarly, other giant's daughters have exploited their magical powers in the course of their lives. In *Hidden Daughters*, Olwen is able to tell Hw about her journey in the land of the dead, the magical ordeals she has had to perform to come out of it and the wisdom she has acquired through it.

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[12] Sian Hayton, *The Last Flight* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1993), p. 261. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

More magic pervades the vicissitudes of Olwen's sister Essullt. She has lived as a free spirit before being summoned up by her sisters to be reincarnated again and use her healing powers to help Marighal's childbirth in *The Last Flight*. A widespread tradition lists a number of Celtic 'divine hags' able to transform themselves into animals and often capable of healing.[13] Clearly, Essullt embodies the Celtic hag: born with supernatural healing powers, she is also able to turn herself into an owl for a season. When she returns to her human body, she has not lost her magical healing powers.

As they embody the archetypal witch of the Celtic world, paradox is at the root of the giant's daughters' lives. Born out of the giant's unions with human women, their mothers have never survived their births. Their lives have originated from death and seemingly the course of their lives can cause their father's death. Usbathaden's determination to keep his daughters in the safety of his own fortress is a selfish act: the loss of virginity of any of his daughters' would allegedly cause his own death. When he finally seems to have been murdered (he reappears however in the shape of a dragon in *The Last Flight*) by Olwen's husband Culhuch, the daughters lose their immortality. Trapped between a supernatural past and a mortal present, Usbathaden's daughters face the challenge of humanity in *Hidden Daughters*. Divided between two groups, some of the sisters stay at the fortress with Marighal, while twelve others move into a monastery near Kynan's city. In the course of their last reincarnations Usbathaden's daughters pay the cost of Marighal's and Olwen's rebellions against the giant. Unable to live in the world like other mortals or be accepted by humans, they choose to live an isolated life that allows them to finish their days in peace:

> The threat of final extinction had hung over us since my father's death like a black cloud on the horizon at the dawn of every day. It was like a sound of thunder waking us from a nightmare, and we who left the shadow of our father's walls did so only to find company in our new found mortality. (p. 42)

[13] See Anne Ross, 'The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts', in *The Witch Figure*, ed. by Venetia Newall (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 139-164.

Though they have been mortal beings since their father's death, none of the sisters seem to ever face a real death. Marighal is able to resuscitate herself after asking Kynan to kill her and use her bones to climb up the magical tree the giant has transformed himself into. Olwen, apparently dead for a length of time, wakes up eventually from her long sleep the moment her sister Barve is drowned. Barve has been drowned as punishment for her attempt to kill Culhuch in revenge for her sister Olwen's death, but, ironically, even Barve's death is not final: her sacrifice will long be remembered, her memory worshipped and her life sanctified.

The giant's daughters, whose semi-mortal state places them in the liminal space, trapped between the human and the supernatural dimensions, primarily embody the ambiguous conflict between the giant's and the human worlds. Paradoxically, Marighal and her sisters are extremely powerful and helplessly weak, threatening creatures and victimised outcasts. Throughout the *Trilogy*, Usbathaden's daughters attempt to overcome the magical prison their father keeps them in and descend into the human world. Significantly, although their world and their existence is acknowledged, their point of view is still 'trapped' in the monks' letters – in the first two novels – and in Josiah's investigation – in the third. The daughters' stories are not independent narratives, but form a secondary level of the monks' primary narratives. However, when the Christian monks collect and write down the daughters' stories, the monks have to face episodes that go beyond their comprehension and mysteries they are unable to solve. The monks' attitudes change throughout their narratives and progressively increase their tolerance towards Usbathaden's family. Just before Selyf meets Marighal for the first time in *Cells of Knowledge*, he had awoken 'in terror from a dream thinking that Leviathan had left the sea and was striking his door with his tail' (p. 17). Similarly, in *Hidden Daughters* Hw's first encounter with Barve is sinisterly haunted:

> It appeared from their confused account that whoever was steering it was sailing closer to the wind than anyone had ever done before, giving a fresh impetus to the talk of sorcery. [...] My concern increased to alarm when the sailor, having lifted a large bundle from the boat, shook out the skirts of a long tunic and the folds of a long

> kerchief. The sailor was a woman and my soul warned me that she brought affliction with her. (p. 36)

Hw's feelings towards Barve are dictated by his memories of Selyf's story. When editing Marighal's story through his father's letters in *Cells of Knowledge*, Hw was often suspicious and his remarks highlighted the use of sorcery and black arts, holding Marighal to be a very dangerous, deceiving creature. Similarly, at the beginning of his own narrative in *Hidden Daughters*, Hw does not want to leave the other monks alone with Barve, 'so seductive were her lies' (p. 67). Towards the end, however, Hw's compassion towards Barve becomes a sincere friendship and Hw realises he has the strength to endure sacrifice and stand up for human rights: 'I looked around the house and none would meet my eye. It is only what I deserve. I have looked the other way too often and my protesting voice has been silent when it should have been raised' (p. 225). Likewise, in *The Last Flight*, despite Josiah's attempts to be objective about the witnesses of the story, he is highly suspicious about Essullt and Drust's ancestry. In his words: 'there is also a mystery about her ancestors which few know', and 'no one has been able to confirm Drust's claim that he was raised in a noble household' (p. 2). Nevertheless Josiah has to admit that: 'The facts were all confirmed independently by every man in the three steadings involved, and, incredible as it must seem, we must take it that we have no less than the truth' (p. 3).

It is symptomatic that Josiah relies only on the men's versions of the story to reconstruct the truth. However, despite his gender bias, his is an important statement as it demonstrates the lowering of the barrier of the Christian monk's rationality to accept the inexplicable magic of the giant's world. Josiah becomes more aware that there might be facts, practices, or events that rationality would interpret as implausible. This means that space has been made in the rational order of things to acknowledge the irrational mystery represented by Usbathaden's family. The conflict between Christian religion and pagan practices seems mitigated or, at least, the binary opposition has been questioned. The monks' attempt to 'rationalise' the events narrated by the

giant's daughters is an impossible task and certainly emphasises the relativity of rationalism: Usbathaden's magical world is just as 'real' as the monks' historical world. The fact that magic cannot be explained through the monks' way of thinking does not deny its existence, but suggests the necessity of a more open attitude towards the inexplicable.

Selyf, Hw and Josiah all follow a path that has led them from the prison of a dogmatic, orthodox attitude to the final acceptance of the mysteries they are not able to understand. Prompted by their encounters with the giant's daughters, the monks are eager to know more through a wider perspective than the one allowed by the strict rules of the order. When Selyf and Kynan finally reach Usbathaden's fortress, the monk is keen to discover all the mysteries concealed in the giant's hall. After Evabyth and Marighal have finished their stories towards the end of *Cells of Knowledge*, Selyf still feels there is more to be discovered and his curiosity pushes him to be braver than he would have been at the beginning of his narrative. Thus, Selyf is fascinated by the explanation of the golden globes, the mechanical devices Usbathaden employed to check on his daughters and anybody else in the fortress. Furthermore, the luxurious rooms decorated with the daughters woven works vividly stimulate Selyf's senses:

> All around us were couches covered with cushions, and the walls were hung with thick, soft hangings which were pictures of strange animals and flowers, and laughing people in brightly coloured clothes. [...] All these pictures had been made by the sisters over the years, and I was filled with wonder to think that these women who had never left their halls could find so much to weave into their pictures. I do not doubt that it was the softness lapping around them that would make them see such wonderful sights and dreams. Truly it was a place to fill and drown your senses, and to tempt the flesh with sensations of delight. (p. 163)

At this point Selyf's mind is ready to accept the inexplicable realm of imagination. The tapestry, product of the daughters' creative work, is the result of their struggle to escape if only with their imaginative powers. The unexpected, uncanny beauty of the creative work invites the monk to take a step away from the stiff limits of narrow-minded rationality. His feelings of

wonder are symptoms of the acceptance of the marvellous and the uncanny that Usbathaden and his world embody.

Throughout the three narratives conflicts originate from several opposing forces in the stories. Expressed through multiple points of view and with the intriguing use of glosses to the main narratives, Hayton succeeds in portraying the tensions set by the two conflicting worlds: a real world against a mythical dimension, eternity against mortality, Christian religion against pagan beliefs, rationality against imagination, prayer against magic. The conflict between the two worlds is emphasised through the monks' commentaries that follow the main narratives, deconstructing the authority of the giants' daughters tales, while criticising their brothers' words at the same time. Thus Hw shows deep concerns and a biased attitude towards Usbathaden and his family throughout his comments about Selyf's vicissitudes with Marighal in *Cells of Knowledge*. Similarly, in *Hidden Daughters*, Josiah criticises Hw's narrative creating a fracture in the monks' dogmatic culture; when, for instance, the giant's daughters discuss mortality and poverty rates, Josiah notices Hw's irritability:

> Hw was very angry at all this numbering. He said it was presumptuous, like trying to see into the mind of God. I could not understand his point of view, for I think that numbers are the very way in which God has chosen to speak to us of his mind. I am not alone in this, but Hw has no patience with any idea of mine. (p. 59)

These conflicting voices within the same narratives are the expression of the differing opinions within the Christian world. The Christian brothers do not constitute a solid defence against the irrational, dangerous, magical world. In fact, they are constantly undermining their own positions and authority when their disagreements become manifest. As Christopher Whyte has pointed out: 'Christianity is not unified or monolithic but an ideology in a state of flux, a multiplicity of belief systems alternating or coexisting under a single name'.[14] With no inner unity and consistency, it becomes more difficult for the Christians to prove the deceptiveness of Usbathaden's world. Furthermore, beside

[14] Christopher Whyte, 'Postmodernism, gender and belief in recent Scottish fiction', *Scottish Literary Journal*, vol. 23, 1 (May 1996), 50-64 (p. 58).

Usbathaden's irrational world, the Christian dogmatic authority is threatened by another strong external force: Islam.[15] There are several veiled references to the Moslem religion throughout the *Trilogy*. The reference to the Cave, at the beginning of Kigva's narratives in *Hidden Daughters* could be derived from the Eighteenth Sura of the Koran, entitled 'The Cave'. In both the *Koran* and *Hidden Daughters*, the concept of rebirth underlies the initiation ritual performed by Kigva and the seven sleepers' in the cave. Other references to the seven sleepers are at the end of *The Last Flight*, when Josiah mentions the cave and seven tiny men:

> I woke to find several small faces staring down at me. One of them spoke, yet as he spoke, I seemed to hear the sound of many voices chiming together, and he always referred to himself as 'we'. This was a strange night indeed. The waterfall a green wall at the end of the cave, the flickering tapers throwing shadows in the gloom, and myself, seated in the midst of seven tiny men all telling me the last part of this strange story. (p. 257)

The last episode in Josiah's narrative poses doubts about his dogmatic attitude. The references to Islam are endorsed by another mysterious figure, the 'wood man', who appears and disappears throughout the *Trilogy*. Though seemingly human, the character is at first dehumanised and mistaken for a part of the woods where Selyf encounters him in *Hidden Daughters*: 'It was very brown from the sun and hung about with tangled grey hair. The eyebrows were heavy and black and overshadowed deep set dark eyes that looked past us to the sea at our back' (p. 120). The wood man has demonic features: he appears several times throughout the *Trilogy*, first to Kigva in *Hidden Daughters*, then on separate occasions, to Selyf, Drust and Essullt in *The Last Flight*. His encounter with Kigva reinforces his supernatural connotation, as he foresees the curse on her people and her land. Likewise, the wood-man is partially responsible for Drust's and Essullt's sexual initiations that takes place in analogous mythical rituals and involves a human-shaped tree with androgynous features. In *The*

[15] See 'Interview with Sian Hayton', appendix.

Last Flight the encounter with Selyf, however, reveals the wood-man's connection to Islam:

> Prophet, if believing women came to you and pledge themselves to serve no other god beside Allah, to commit neither theft, nor adultery, nor child-murder, to utter no monstrous falsehoods of their own invention, and to disobey you in nothing just or reasonable, accept their allegiance and implore Allah to forgive them. Allah is forgiving and merciful. (p. 124)

The wood-man's interventions in the magical world of the giant Usbathaden are less crucial than his encounter with the monks Selyf and Josiah. These make him a feature of the historical world as well as the demon haunting the magical world. While in the magical world his presence is accepted and appears to have a positive impact, in the historical world of the Christian monks, the wood-man is a further threat to Christian dogmatic ideology. Just like the giant and his daughters, the wood-man tips the already fragile balance of the system of beliefs across Britain at the time of Christianisation.

The third area of conflict deserves a separate discussion because it occurs within each dimension and creates an internal split in both the magical and the historical worlds: the battle between genders. Women and men are equally opposed within and outwith Usbathaden's fortress. Monks and warriors are juxtaposed both with each other and with the other women in the narratives. The relationships between genders, however, are not as clear-cut. As Gifford has emphasised:

> There is [...] no simplistic male/female schema to the trilogy. Hayton's mixing of genres (historical, fantastic, and Celtic traditional) allows her to confuse and confound any notions of gender being a simple determinant of social and cultural power relationship. [...] By populating her Scottish past with such a diversity of fantastic people Hayton is recreating history and creating new legend and myth. She deliberately blurs the boundaries between the two, for her overall aim is to create an equality of space for her Celtic female alongside the male, a space which conventional histories would not allow. [16]

[16] Gifford, 'Contemporary Fiction II', p. 613.

Although they are the product of three male authors, the monks' narratives incorporate the female point of view as well as the male one. In Hayton's historical narratives, women's voices have a more prominent position than in the official historical documents of the times. From their marginalised and victimised position, Hayton's women become protagonists and makers of their own stories as well as makers of history. History is thus subverted: great historical events, such as the Viking raids and the Christianisation of Britain, and the great protagonists of the mainstream historiography, become marginal backgrounds within the histories of the lesser characters and the most obscure, unrecorded events. In their place are the conflicts between the otherwise anonymous monks and the unheard women at the crucial time of the Christianisation of Britain. As Whyte has suggested:

> Gender roles interact with belief systems as narrative patterns do. An ideology specifies the behaviour appropriate to each sex, puts configurations of the masculine and the feminine and substantiates them through narratives of how they came to be, through what may be called an ontology of gender. Conversely, particular kinds of behaviour can undermine the ideology or at least question its dictates. It is hardly accidental that Hayton chose to set her questioning of gender roles in a period of major conflict and coalescence in the history of Christianity in these islands.[17]

The importance of women's actions and gender roles in the course of the stories becomes evident through a closer analysis of the text. *Cells of Knowledge* and *Hidden Daughters* begin with Kilidh's and Kigva's folk tale narratives. The child of their unfair union, Culhuch, and Kilidh's other son, Kynan, are the usurpers of Usbathaden's power and the destroyers of his strength. These apparently unlinked 'Scenes' acquire great importance when connected to the story as a whole. The archetypal conflict that paradoxically splits and unites Kilidh and Kigva triggers the persistent gender conflict throughout the narratives. In the two 'Scenes', the conflict is emphasised through the use of opposite points of view. In Kilidh's story, the Queen (Kigva) is only the warrior's occasional lover. In Kigva's story, however, the

[17] Whyte 1997, p. 58.

perspectives are inverted and through Kigva's primary point of view, her past vicissitudes and the humiliation suffered because of Kilidh's behaviour crucially explain the plots of the *Trilogy*. In Elphinstone's words:

> The events in both scenes are the same. The first narrative is from the point of view of Kilidh, the second from that of Kigva. [...] In the first, male telling she is merely an object in the plot which centres around Kilidh. In the second telling woman has become subject, not object.[18]

Kilidh and Kigva's union is the original sin, the starting point of an unfair, patriarchal order both in the magical and the 'real' worlds. In the mythical world, Usbathaden is the archetype of the autarchic father. In the dictatorial regime of his household, his daughters are not allowed any freedom. The sisters are forbidden a union with a human being on the grounds that it would cause the giant's death. Although women clearly outnumber men, the social order portrayed is no matriarchy: the giant's power over his daughters is apparently unlimited. The gender conflict delineated in the household is also symptomatically underlined by the absence of any of the mothers. All of them died in childbirth. Questions arise about the gender of the giant's offspring: why are they all girls? Is Usbathaden unable to father male children? Or does he kill any male children who could threaten his power? The patriarchal order established by Usbathaden's power is inevitably put at risk by the giant's own paradoxical nature. Willing to test his daughter Marighal, he gives her the chance to marry Kynan, his fosterling. While this desire clearly goes against his own nature, since their union would signify his death, he imposes impossible tasks for Kynan to perform in order to be worthy of Marighal. Her choice to help Kynan in his tasks is determined by her desire to be finally free from her father's control. Even though there are hints of her sexual awakening, rather than longing for a physical union with a man, Marighal is primarily desperate for freedom. It is from a strong desire for self-determination that Marighal chooses to rebel against her father and longs for an escape from his fortress.

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[18] Elphinstone 1995, p. 122.

Likewise, freedom and self-determination are keywords to understand Olwen's decision to marry Culhuch. Having decided to live her life in purity, she is nonetheless charmed by Culhuch's wooing. Olwen's exercising of her right to be married virtually kills Usbathaden, although Culhuch physically commits his murder. In Gifford's words: 'These women *have* to fall into the world of man, so that [...] a new world can evolve from the female-male and Celtic-Christian confrontation'.[19]

Beside the warriors, the sisters build relationships with Christian monks. Again, inter-gender relationships are affected by the coexistence of two opposite worlds: pagan and Christian. The early Christian monks are of two kinds: those still able to be fascinated and accept the magical pagan world and those afraid of it and willing to delete any trace of it from the new Christian world. Selyf and Josiah are willing to accept the uncanny elements of Usbathaden's world. Even though they question it, they are nonetheless prepared to acknowledge its mysteries. At the end of *Cells of Knowledge* and the beginning of *Hidden Daughters*, Selyf chooses to look after the twelve sisters who decide to take on a sort of monastic life by Kynan's side. Though he warns the sisters against their own magical powers, his feelings towards the magical world are of tolerance.

On the other hand, Hw's attitude undergoes dramatic changes. While at the beginning, when he edits his father's letters in *Cells of Knowledge*, his attitude is extremely hostile to the giant's world, towards the end his suspicious nature gradually collapses. At the end of the first narrative he is afraid of meeting the giant's daughters because 'they change shape so easily' (p. 137), and at the beginning of *Hidden Daughters*, he admits his concerns about Usbthaden's family: 'There can be no doubt that their existence itself is unlawful, and that it is our duty to contain their power' (p. 87). His fears of the giant's daughters are dictated by the prejudice that women have the power to summon up spirits with ease: 'a comb drawn through your hair will summon spirits. I have seen them and heard them when my mother combed her hair, but

[19] Gifford 'Contemporary Fiction II', p. 614.

she was a good Christian and at once prayed for their departure' (p. 94). Despite Hw's preconceptions against women and pagan rituals, at the end of *Hidden Daughters* the monk's views are changed. After suffering next to Barve, he is willing to baptise her before her death, and accept his own death as a result of her offence to Culhuch.

The ambiguous interaction between genders in the *Trilogy* suggests a partial overcoming of the conflict towards the end. Marighal's and Olwen's unions with their human partners do not represent the final compromise between genders. Rather than the overcoming of the conflict between man and woman, they represent the opening of a new era: the acceptance of differences and the partial merging of opposing worlds. The final section of the Trilogy, which mirrors the opening 'Scenes' of the first two novels, makes this more obvious. The circular structure makes the evolution of the conflict more significant. From the archetypal unfair union between Kigva and Kilidh, genders have travelled far: the universal bond that ties Essullt and her half-human nephew Drust is perceived as essential to the world's existence: their union signifies the principle that links everything together and that goes beyond the accepted and known rules. The final scene of *The Last Flight* represents the climactic solution to the gender conflict running both through Usbathaden's mythic dimension and the monks' historical world:

> We were allowed to see their conjunction once. It was not the coupling of a man and a woman. Naked, they lay side by side and pressed themselves together. By and by there appeared from the side of each something like a hand that reached across the space between them. The hands met, clasped each other and grew wider till the whole side of the man meshed and tangled with that of the woman. (260-61)

Beliefs, worlds, genders are all sources of conflict through the narrative of Hayton's *Trilogy*. These various conflicts are also the starting points of the four quests that involve four of the giant's daughters: Marighal, Olwen, Barve and Essullt. The quests result from the sisters' interactions with the human world. Usbathaden's four daughters share a strong desire of moving beyond the limits of their father's fortress and control. Their rebellious acts, far from being

easily performed, require great determination and sacrifice. By going against their father's will and causing his death, they are also giving up their immortality. In order to be in the human world the giant's daughters have a high price to pay: to live like humans, to be born, to grow up and finally die.

Marighal and Olwen pioneer the descent into the human world when they seek a physical union with a human partner. Marighal's attempt to escape from the fortress through her marriage to Kynan and Olwen's marriage to Culhuch against her father's will challenge Usbathaden's paternal authority. But neither challenge results in a simplistic positive feminist quest, as Marighal's failed marriage and Olwen's unhappy union both signify the complexities behind the inter-gender relationships throughout the *Trilogy*. The conflict between the giant's desire to keep his power and the daughters' quest for self-empowerment underlie the gender issue in the three narratives, but the daughters' quests assume further and deeper meanings. Marighal's and Olwen's quests differ from Barve's and Essullt's because of their purposes. The desire to pursue and assert their own freedom has triggered the rebellious deeds of the first two daughters against Usbathaden's will. In the second and third narratives, however, quests become more universal and their meanings less overt. Having discovered that her sisters have disappeared after an attack on their house, Barve's decision to go and search the world for them is mainly focused on her desire to know her sisters' destinies. Nonetheless, there is more than sibling's love in Barve's quest, as revealed In *Hidden Daughters*, when she is about to die, at Culhuch's hall:

> In my early lives I often saw things for the first time and rejoiced in their beauty and complexity. This can no longer happen to me and the sense of wonder is gone. You must feel pity for one who will never again see anything for the first time. Tomorrow, when the water rises to cover my mouth, at last an experience will be a wonder to me. (p. 230)

Death is the final destination in Barve's cognitive journey. Death has been a consistent presence in the narrative, from the moment Barve shares her recollections with the monks. Several sinister episodes punctuate the narrative

of *Hidden Daughters* with morbid references to death. The presence of their father's corpse, the seven sisters' sudden disappearance, and Olwen's apparent death make *Hidden Daughters* a narrative of death. In the second volume of the *Trilogy*, Usbathaden's daughters experience the ultimate and unrepeatable ending to their lives for the first time. The experience of death symbolises the ultimate challenge, the final overcoming of the ontological threshold into the unknown. Although death is inevitably associated with suffering, Barve's experience of death provides a different significance to her whole life. Having started a journey willing to see parts of the world that she would never have seen otherwise, death may be considered as an extension of this journey into the unknown, rather than its ending.

Whereas Marighal and Olwen's quests have brought their descent from a supernatural to a human dimension, Barve's adventure follows a reverse path, challenging the limits of her new human condition into a metaphysical dimension of death and afterlife. Death is the culmination of the process of humanisation started by Olwen and Marighal and signposted by Usbathaden's death. Rather than being the end to everything, death is a new beginning. Barve's memory will be worshipped for a long time, a sign that her physical death has not removed her spirit from the earth. Her existence will continue in a wholly spiritual dimension.

Essullt's quest also begins and ends in a spiritual dimension. Her choice to join the real world is a symptom of her desire to know and experience all that was denied to her in her previous lives. This results in her working as a humble midwife, even though her uncommon healing powers make her famous all over Scotland and Ireland. Moreover, she experiences human love, through her 'human' union with March and supernatural love with her nephew Drust. The two unions signify Hayton's attempt to solve all the conflicts set throughout the *Trilogy*. The supernatural world embraces the human one. The two do not merge together. Their bond still asserts their differences. The love between the supernatural women and the human men is physical and spiritual: Marighal and

Kynan, Olwen and Culhuch, Essullt and March all share the same spirit of tolerance and acceptance of each other's identities and differences.

The daughters' quests have proved that there is something worth discovering beyond the fortress's walls. The sisters' voyages into the unknown human world are the manifestations of the universal need to escape the limits of the prison built by ignorance. Though conscious of their risks, Hayton's creatures are willing to challenge and be challenged, to change and be changed. And if their mortal lives end, their spirits will live. Mortal life has been a source of much suffering for the giant's daughters. Their existence assumes a more meaningful status at the end: death, loss of immortality or marriage to a human being have fixed the daughters' changeable identities into a permanent condition.

A question could be asked about the successful conclusion to the *Trilogy*. With the conflicts partially overcome, there seems to be no more room or scope for a quest. Does Usbathaden's death, and the daughter's subsequent loss of immortality, signify the end of the quest and therefore the end of the challenge? Although, apparently, the opposites of pagan and Christian worlds, magic and human characters, female and male perspectives are somehow mitigated, these conflicts are not entirely over. The possibility that Usbathaden could still come back to life in another form is very likely, as proved by his reappearance in the shape of a dragon in *The Last Flight*. Haunted by their father's ghost and set against the mythical incestuous relationship between Essullt and Drust, the unions between the supernatural giant's daughters are dangerously unstable. Although part of Usbathaden's magical power has been disclosed to the human world beyond the fortress, mystery still pervades the conclusion of the *Trilogy*. Josiah's final words hint to the inexplicable paradoxes that linger even after the end of the story:

> All who believe in God must look upon His universe as the constant expression of His will; every smallest part is constantly vitalised and conserved by the spirit of the Divine and there is no life or existence apart from His consciously exerted will. It was He that in the beginning moved upon the face of the waters, and brought forth the actual out of the chaos of the potential. As we strive to think of Him, we plunge into the abyss of silence and of infinite glory.

Taceo. (p. 262)

God is simultaneously 'the abyss of silence' and 'infinite glory'. *The Last Flight* ends with the acknowledgement of the paradoxical nucleus of the belief in any supernatural entity. At the end of the *Trilogy* the metaphysical conflict is not solved and the mystery remains still veiled behind and beyond Josiah's eternal silence.

The conflict between supernatural events and reality is at the heart of Hayton's fictional worlds and invites the reader to explore what lies beyond them. In her novel set in the modern world, *The Governors*, Hayton's interest in psychoanalysis influences the creation of the supernatural dimension in a different way from the *Trilogy*. Magic does not belong to the outside world, but is an inner feature of Hester's mind. As in the *Trilogy*, the narrative of *The Governors* is fragmented throughout. The use of glosses is substituted by epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter, anticipating its mood and motifs. The novel also alternates between two narrative voices, apparently belonging to two different sets of texts. The voices interact with each other and encourage a playful involvement with the reader. The intrusion of the second voice deconstructs the illusion of the rational, solid, reliable narrative from the start. When the second voice speaks for the first time, the third-person narrative is interrupted to leave room for a mysterious first-person narrator:

> *I knew she was trying to get me going — fooling around in the bath like that — but I managed to even the score at the party. Ronnie, the neighbourhood fat man was making the usual demand for attention. She had parked on a straightbacked chair and was gazing out at the golden triangle of sea glinting between the houses.*[20]

The use of italicised typeface creates an immediate effect of differentiation of the two texts at the level of paratext, while it suggests that a different voice is speaking. The use of different pronouns (I, she) in the passage produces a

[20] Sian Hayton, *The Governors* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1992), p. 10. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

further effect of estrangement and duplication. The occurrence of these intersections becomes more frequent in the narrative as Hester's mind becomes closer to an unusual kind of mental breakdown. Her mind becomes increasingly involved in a world that is separate from the real world. The boundaries between the two dimensions are never well defined, so that it becomes virtually impossible to trace any borderlines. However, the second voice not only coincides with Hester's hallucinations, but also is also intrusive in the realistic plot. The voice often seems to be that of a spectator commenting on what is happening to the characters with sharp irony:

> *She got tired of all the waiting and took herself to the Ladies. Once she was in there she caught sight of herself in the mirror. 'Christ,' she said, 'James is right, you know. I am putting on the beef.'*
> *At the point I took off I can't take it when she starts banging about her looks.* (pp. 151-2)

Elsewhere, the second voice seems to belong to a different world, suggesting that it might be a creature creeping out of the imaginary world. Along with the two narrative voices, the story is also divided into two main plots. For the sake of this analysis, they will be referred to as Hester's and Hesione's plot.

The background to Hesione / Hester's alienation is established in the realistic part of the narrative, in Hester's plot. A complex relationship with her father and the consequent questioning of her own identity trigger a series of psychological problems: absence of sexual desire, depression, alienation. Hester is a control-freak, a young woman whose life is paced by regular rhythms and painstaking routines haunted by the fear that something could go wrong. Divided between an existence she does not seem to fit into any longer and the desire to be elsewhere, the main problem is Hester's search for an identity. The quest into the subconscious abyss develops into the magical journey of a woman looking for a name, a body and a self. The sea links the character with her father, a frustrated marine biologist, who had decided to name his daughter after a Greek mythological creature. The daughter of King Laomedon of Troy, Hesione was supposed to be sacrificed by her father in

order to placate a sea monster sent to the city by the gods Poseidon and Apollo. Saved by another mythological character, Hercules, Hesione is then made a prisoner when Laomedon did not keep his promises.[21] The reference to the Greek myth of Hesione reveals ambiguities in the father's choice to name his daughter Hesione. The name 'Hesione' works like an omen throughout Hester's life. Her father had chosen it 'in case she at some future time should find herself captivated by marine life' (p. 12), but unfortunately 'before he had time to show her the meaning of this talisman he was killed in a car crash driving home' (p. 12). The complex relationship between Hesione / Hester and her father is epitomised by Hesione's refusal of her name. Hesione's attempt to carve a new identity for herself results in the eradication of the most important segment of her identity, her paternal bond. By choosing to be called Hester, she breaks from her closest family link and unconsciously fragments her identity.

Hester's second pregnancy starts a phase of questioning and the character's increasing alienation. The fear and fascination with the changes of her body create a fertile soil for her imagination and isolate Hester more and more from the real world. Julia Kristeva has argued that a connection exists between the physical aspects of pregnancy and their consequences on the mind. Although the process of the splitting of the body takes place in the womb, it has a parallel effect on the woman's self. Thus, the self begins a process of horizontal separation form the social environment and present time, while it establishes a closer vertical tie towards the mother's self and a universal, timeless dimension. These two processes reach their peak at birth:

> By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself. She thus actualises the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond.[22]

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[21] See Jenny March, *Cassel's Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassel, 1999), p. 394. See also Homer, *Iliad* 5.638-51, 20.144-8 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.211-17.

[22] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A Semiotic approach to Literature and Art* (1980), ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, transl. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 239.

Pregnancy, according to Kristeva, is an ambivalent process through which a woman can experience alienation from her own social existence, while becoming aware of her own identity in a completely different dimension and from a thoroughly different perspective. When pregnancy occurs, the pervasively masculine social environment almost ceases to be real. A new dimension established by the instinctive ties of mother-daughter-mother is the crucial new feature of the woman's self. In *The Governors*, however, pregnancy fails to establish a universal bond neither between Hester and her own mother nor with her father. In fact, during her pregnancy, Hester's progressive alienation affects her whole family and existence. It is then that Hesione's search for another alternative world becomes an urgent necessity. After the gap left empty by Hester's father's death, pregnancy is the catalyst towards the search for a solution of the riddle connecting the sea, her father and her name.

The first hints of Hester's alienation are revealed by her attitude towards her body. Pregnancy and ageing have altered it. The ordinary daily routine of a bath becomes a sensual ritual of discovery. Hester explores the different parts of her own body, with a strange sense of detached curiosity:

> "Two foothills and a vast, smooth mountain. [...] I wonder what it would be like to explore there. Tricky – kind of boggy I should think – and slippery underfoot."
> She closed one eye and tried to see a baggage train fighting its way up the pass of her cleavage. (p. 8)

Different parts of her body are transformed into features of a new landscape. Hester's body is a map, to be read and deciphered, with specific routes to be recognised and crossed. The conceptual journey anticipates Hesione's quest in the sea world, and reaffirms Hester's need to travel through her body in order to acknowledge its existence and recognise it. Hester's physical alienation from the realm of bodily sensations finds further evidence and a more obvious manifestation in her frustrated relationship with her husband:

> Usually the only comfort she found in pregnancy itself was the fact that she could avoid sex. Not that James ever knew about her reluctance. She managed to play the part of the aroused woman quite

> efficiently, and he was as inexperienced as herself when they came to the honeymoon. (p. 28)

The detached attitude manifested through her effort to depersonalise the sexual experience is a further symptom of Hester's cracked identity. The inability to establish a fulfilling bond between her husband's body and her own suggests that her body does not communicate with her mind. Body and mind are but two facets of the same alienating process Hester is going through. The threat of a miscarriage is the climactic experience of this dual process of alienation. Bodily dysfunctions have a drastic consequence on Hester's mind, as everything seems to have lost its meaning:

> She was alone with fear. She was steeped in it. Every cell in her body was swollen with dread. It was spreading from this moment to all the other moments in her life, tainting the past and polluting the future – trickling outward and spreading like an incoming tide through sand. Nothing would ever be the same, not now she had found that disaster could really happen to her. The world was revealed as a cruel and chaotic place. (p. 36)

The Governors' magical world is mainly set in marine environments that reflect the psychological tensions delineated in Hester's plot. Hesione, the sea creature her father had wanted, becomes involved in several strange encounters, in uncanny situations surrounded by unlikely marvellous settings. Here, Hester's subconscious can roam free from any constraints imposed by herself, her family or her social environment. In the world of her subconscious her innermost fears and desires become real and more manifest to her than ever.

The sudden appearance of a mysterious door on the ground floor of her house signals the start of Hesione's adventure. The door is a dangerous presence, but the discovery of the magical portal intrigues Hester: fear of the unknown and desire of novelty coexist at the first stage of Hester / Hesione's split. Doors, thresholds and portals are symbols often employed in fantasy literature as gateways to parallel dimensions and otherworlds. Characters seldom encounter magic portals to the unknown worlds by chance. In fact, the finding of the gateway to the otherworld often implies the idea of election. As

John Clute and John Grant explain: 'In fantasy, it is very often the case that a character who finds a portal has in some sense been found by that portal'.[23] The door represents the possibility of going beyond the boundaries of this dimension to explore a new undiscovered world, and the existence of a parallel alternative dimension becomes the focus of Hesione's imaginary plot. The door is not only there because the character wants it to be there, it is there because it has been drawn into being by that desire. It reveals itself to Hester at precisely the moment she needs it most. In Freudian terms, doors are the subconscious representation of female sexual organs. As we read in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): 'There are some symbols which bear a single meaning almost universally: thus the Emperor and the Empress (or the King and the Queen) stand for the parents, rooms represent women and their entrances and exits the openings of the body'.[24] Freud also suggested that 'cupboards, carriages or ovens may represent the uterus'.[25] The psychoanalytical identification of Hesione's fantasy of the door with ideas of maternity and fertility becomes even more manifest as the story develops. Although situated only beyond the walls of her house, the passage hints a marine environment:

> The passage beyond the door was lit by tapers in rusty sconces and it curved to the right and down. The flagged floor was lightly strewn with fine white sand; the walls were of roughly worked stone and the roof was cut out the living rock. She stepped down into the passage and her feet grinding on the sand sent tiny echoes spattering away from her. (p. 68)

Consistent sea imagery returns shortly afterwards, as Hesione is progressing in her tour through the tunnel and a spiral staircase:

> Downward and round she travelled in a long gentle spiral with tides of whispers washing about her. At last she rounded a curve and was not

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[23] John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit, 1997), p. 776.

[24] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vol., ed. and transl. by James Strachan (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 5, p. 683.

[25] Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 5, p. 684.

> surprised to see Mrs MacCrimmond in her crumpled raincoat. She held something in her hand and thrust it at Hesione in silence. It was a shell smeared with grey brown paste and she pointed at it with a long clawed finger. (p. 69)

The shell, the tides and even Mrs MacCrimmond's raincoat and claw all share a strong connection to the sea-world. Furthermore, Hesione notices the shell smells like the dead seal she had previously seen on a family outing. In the section on water dreams Freud quoted an example that bears an incredible resemblance to this first stage of Hesione's vision:

> A subterranean channel led direct into the water from a place in the floor of her room (genital canal-amniotic fluid). She raised a trap-door in the floor and a creature dressed in brown fur, very much resembling a seal, promptly appeared.[26]

The remarkable similarities of the two dreams suggest that in her creation of Hesione's dream Hayton might have been influenced by her reading of Freud's theories. Her readings of psychoanalytical studies, admittedly, have been an early influence on her imagination. In her words:

> My father [...] was an adamant Freudian. [...] When I was young, Freud's books were lying about in the shelves. So, I started reading those and then I found that I didn't really agree with him, because he is an... archetypal male! So then I discovered Jung and I thought that's more like it.[27]

Despite Hayton's disagreement with Freud's views on gender, her reading of his study seems undeniably influential for the writing of *The Governors*. Apart from the identical imagery, Hesione's vision fits in with Freud's analysis of birth-dreams: 'A large number of dreams, often accompanied by anxiety and having as their content such objects as passing through narrow spaces or being in water, are based upon phantasies of intra-uterine life, of existence in the womb and of the act of birth' (p. 399). Often characterised by the presence of water, according to Freud, these dreams signify desire for renovation, rebirth or

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[26] Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 5, p. 401.
[27] See 'Interview with Sian Hayton', Appendix.

maternity. The influence of C. G. Jung's theories on Hayton's imaginative narrative reinforces a psychological interpretation of *The Governors*. In *Concerning Rebirth* (1950), Jung explained the concept of rebirth in terms of 'subjective transformation',[28] a process of personality change that can originate from the 'loss of a soul',[29] or an identity crisis. In psychological terms, Jung's theorised process of rebirth shows similarities to Hesione's traumatic background before the start of her magical journey. Furthermore, Jung suggested several recurring motifs in the magical rituals linked with the process of rebirth: passage through a hole, symbolic death, ablution and name change.[30] Remarkably, the elements of rebirth presented by Jung all bear strong resemblances to the different stages of Hesione's voyage: the passage through the mysterious door, the temporary death of Hester, her marine journey and the recuperation of the original name, Hesione.

Hayton's interest in psychoanalysis is extremely relevant to understand the coalescence of psychological and supernatural elements on her imagination. The trance represents, simultaneously, her attempt to start living again, find a new identity and exorcise the fears of pregnancy, making *The Governors* both a 'fantasy' – an imaginary story of the supernatural – and a 'phantasy' – a psychological journey into the subconscious. Such deliberately open employment of manifest allusions to Freud's and Jung's psychoanalytical theories suggest that Hayton's fantasy / phantasy narrative holds a psychological essence. The psychological dimension of Hesione's journey is also proved by the close relationship between Hester's 'real' life and Hesione's dream, and during the first stage of the marine adventure, Hester's fears are clearly feeding crucial episodes of Hesione's hallucinatory state, such as the seals' dramatic episodes, and her encounters with other marine creatures. Nonetheless, the coexistence of inexplicable elements in the trance accentuates its questioning function, as the psychological journey starts to

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[28] C. J. Jung, *Concerning Rebirth* (1950), *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerard Adler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), vol. 9.i, pp. 113-147, (p. 119).

[29] Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 9.i, p. 119.

[30] Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 9.i, p.129.

challenge Hesione's beliefs. The questioning of the moral codes and the logic of the marine world originates from the acknowledgement of its lack of logic and moral codes. Frustrated by the impossibility of making sense of what is happening, Hesione is unable to overcome the communication barriers between the marine world and herself. The idea that the human mind cannot rationalise and control everything begins to surface through Hesione's oblivious trance. The questioning process is, however, twofold: as she questions the abyss, similarly the marine world questions Hesione's own world and existence, and she begins to think that 'perhaps other humans are more alien than we think' (p.66), and admits to being 'absurd' herself (p. 140). Disappointed and puzzled by her phantasy, she keeps, nonetheless, floating through it. The unpleasant, confusing, difficult side of Hesione's phantasy stresses its *raison d' être* as a quest: the journey is the fundamental part of Hesione's recovery and not a shortcut towards a pleasant utopian world. The magical voyage is a means to an end, to discover more about herself and her life and regain what she has been lost. This slow process of discovery – and recovery – allows Hesione to regain confidence as the truth starts to dawn in her mind:

> My eye's orbit frames the horizon. Behind me on the beach lie long brown straps of kelp. In the sky, the gulls are staggering on the wind. My nails are like pink shells. No – I am human, through and through. I am the one who sees and remembers these things – and I give them meaning. (p. 159)

This crucial passage signals Hesione's first asserting of her own identity, and the acknowledgement of her self as the active maker, the creator, the 'governor' of the surreal underwater world, rather than a mere spectator of it. It is her perspective and judgement that 'governs' everything. Hesione's ability to understand the world, in whatever form it might appear to her, has been re-established by the assertion of her conscious act of creation. After this first achievement, Hesione's journey continues in the attempt to regain the second part of her lost self: her gender identity. The sea world is crowded with sexual objects and graphic scenarios. Her meeting with the mermaids leaves her completely aghast at the filthiness of their sexual games. These however, only

represent the necessary stages of Hesione's search, as Gifford argues: 'The sea dreams and often disgusting rites of therapeutic passage mark the beginning of Hester's quest for integrity and wholeness. They represent her necessary subconscious drowning in the past, in her guilts and fears, to cleanse or more appropriately naturalise her'.[31] The determination to recuperate her gender identity becomes more relevant in the different stages of the final section of the surreal voyage to the sea. After refusing to have her female parts removed by a dubious Dr Caddis, her encounter with Mer Maid (M.M.) has a determining effect in the acceptance of her femininity. M.M. embodies the two stereotypical aspects of the female gender: on stage, she is the sensual *femme fatal*, the cliché of the sexual object alluring to equally stereotyped macho-males; in her privacy, however, M.M. confesses she has been 'the greatest little housewife' (p. 189), looking after husband and house. Devoted wife and sensual lover coexist in M.M., and the two facets of womanhood represent Hester's dilemma about her inability to be both. The admission to the body / mind conflict which triggered Hesione's journey, is openly revealed by the trivial words of a 'boiled lobster':

> 'Why, Honey Child, sex is easy for a kid like you. You just went and forgot about your biggest erogenous zone.'
> 'Where's that?' asked Hesione the boiled lobster.
> 'Your mind, darlin'.' (pp. 190-1)

The rediscovery of her body and its sensuality are not entirely fulfilled until after her affair with Ray, M.M.'s lover. When the affair is consummated in an unusual way during a visit to an underwater family, Hesione's sexual climax signals the ending to the quest. The changes Hesione has undergone are highlighted in the last moment of her marine adventure, when she expresses the wish to re-visit the child trapped in the coral reef: 'She looked into the room where her childhood self still reclined in the tube of coral. It seemed to her that at least the edges of the tube no longer fitted quite so snugly round the tender body [...] The child's hair was freed and floating behind her' (p.207). The child, another

[31] Gifford, 'Contemporary Fiction II', p. 616.

dissociated image of her own self, is symbolically trapped in the process of her growing into womanhood. The relevance of the episode is emphasised by its setting: the so-called 're-think tank', a compartment in the underwater, meant for re-thinking, re-estimating and re-establishing the object of Hesione's search.

In the last chapters, although she has returned to the 'real' world, the character is always referred to as Hesione: the significance of the name change is the final sign of her successful quest. By choosing to be called Hesione in the real world, she has re-established the missing link with her father, healing the fracture that the refusal of her name had originally created in her self. Having borrowed the name of her character from Greek myth, Hayton's psychological phantasy has performed significant transformations to the original story. Both heroines are trapped – Greek myth's Hesione is physically imprisoned in a destiny imposed on her by her own father, and Hayton's Hesione psychologically imprisoned in her own traumatic dream world. Although both heroines escape their prisons, a remarkable difference suggests Hayton's gender agenda, as the modern Hesione has broken free from her own imprisonment. Unlike the Greek myth, Hayton's Hesione has asserted her own identity and reclaimed control over her own existence without Hercules's help. The gender identity quest at the core of *The Governors*, takes a slightly more feminist orientation, for Hayton's character represents a feminist re-enactment of the Greek mythological Hesione, as *The Governors*' Hesione follows her own quest to recuperate her own identity.

The Governors has a circular structure. Hesione's conclusive bath ceremony mirrors the episode quoted earlier at the beginning of the story. The physical alienation observed in the first chapter has evolved into a more empathic body / mind relationship. The regained balance is reinforced by Hesione's final action: her decision to go downstairs, defying the danger of the appearance of the door and finally coming to terms with her sexuality. The final outcome shows Hesione winning on both fronts:

> She stopped outside the door in a pool of moonlight. The walls were intact. Reaching forward, she pushed the door open with her fingertips

> and kept herself in the shaft of blue light. A faint smile came to her lips as she looked down at her pale, shiny body.
> 'James,' she called softly, 'come here a minute. I think I've got something you'll find interesting'. (p. 223)

Throughout *The Governors* two narrative voices, two sets of plots, two narrative genres are intertwined in the complex textual web of the novel. The juxtaposition of opposites, as noted in the introduction, is the most evident feature through which *The Governors* articulates its doppelgänger and develops the concept of quest and conflict. This suspension between alternative interpretations is the most prominent feature of Todorov's definition of fantastic literature. The uncertainty about the true course of events and the ambiguity of the narrative are, as we have seen in the introductory chapter of this thesis, its most distinctive features.[32] However, when readers are informed, perhaps disappointingly, of the medical nature of Hester's hallucination, any last suspension of disbelief of the two plots disappears, leaving only this imposed version of the truth as the final victory of the authoritative voice of the main narrative.

Nevertheless, one detail remains undisclosed. The second voice alternating and undermining the narrator's authorship is not openly justified in the story, although it seems implied that it is another symptom of Hesione's subconscious split. Its apparent belonging to the marine world reinforces a schizoid interpretation: '*I gave Hes a wave of the fin, but she only rippled her fingers in reply and backed out of the doorway like a zombie on speed. She's never seen me in the skin before, so I guess it was no wonder she didn't recognise me*' (pp. 187-8). The link between Hesione and the voice remains unexplained and although the voice is aware of Hesione, it is not clear that the opposite is equally the case. The second voice could arguably be the main voice, the point of view which has dreamed the 'realistic' plot of *The Governors*. The final gesture of salutation seems indeed to be more significant than a mere farewell. Indeed, the second voice suggests the centrality of Hesione's phantasy, the power of the imagination that has enabled both the real and the

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[32] See Todorov, p. 25.

magical world to coexist. The transtextual allusions to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, the clues to the main character's psychological condition and finally the explanation of the magical journey as a result of a nervous breakdown forces a solely psychological interpretation of *The Governors*.

Nonetheless, the supernatural character of Hesione's psychological voyage undoubtedly links the two components of the narrative, phantasy and fantasy. The word 'skin' in the last quoted passage, for instance, introduces a reference to the selkies, as part of the numerous references to the supernatural marine creatures in *The Governors*. A series of recurring hints to Scottish/Celtic superstitions and legends builds a strong supernatural background to Hester/Hesione's development. Symptomatically, these references focus on two main themes: omens and rituals relevant to birth, pregnancy and motherhood, and the supernatural world of selkies and seals. The relevance of these references in Hester's plot becomes clearer when Hesione's imaginary world starts to take over more and more of Hester's alienated self. The formal link between Hester's real life and Hesione's imaginary world is represented by the plethora of superstitious threads interwoven through both worlds.

There are a number of superstitions about pregnancy and birth in Scotland.[33] These superstitions have their roots in the fear that fairies could interfere during the pregnancy or after the baby's birth. Popular traditions hold several means to counteract the power of evil fairies, to protect the newly born from the evil fairies or a sorceress's evil eye. In *The Governors*, Mrs Grieves, James's mother, talks to Hester about the superstitions that were still in use in her own time as 'a lot of nonsense', adding that they would still have some followers today. In Scotland, the time before a baby is christened is traditionally considered the most dangerous time when the fairies could take advantage of the creature yet unprotected by the blessing.[34] In the novel, after Nerine's birth, Christening is perceived as a substitute ritual for the old superstitious methods

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[33] For a more detailed discussion on Scottish customs and folk traditions on birth and pregnancy, see Margaret Bennet, *Scottish Customs from the Cradle to the Grave* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992). See also F. Marian McNeill *The Silver Bough* (1957-68), 4 vol. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989), vol. 1, p. 49, p. 76, p. 81.

[34] See Bennet, pp.1-77.See also McNeill, vol. 1, p. 49.

to preserve the baby from any evil. A mixture of pagan mythology and Christianity is again reinforced by the choice of the name 'Nerine' after a sea nymph.[35] The mythical name re-establishes the father-daughter bond, lost after Hesione's refusal of her own name. Moreover, it breaks the boundaries between established religion, mythology and pagan superstitions. Hester's determination to have the baby Christened on October 31st re-emphasises the conflict between established religion and pagan superstition. The eve of the Christian Day of All Souls is also *Samhain*, the Celtic autumn festival when all the spirits would come out of each corner of the earth.[36] The tension raised by these issues bursts out on the occasion of the Christening. Pressured by her sister to choose a date, Hester answers back snappishly:

> 'She is not going to die, if that's what you mean. The days are gone when a babe had to be snatched from childbed to the font to make sure it didn't spend eternity in Limbo. Don't tell me it's got to you after all. Next thing you'll be scratching her upper lip to ward off the evil eye'. (p. 116)

Despite her apparent dismissal of trust or faith in any superstition, these superstitions exercise a powerful influence on her alienation and subsequent hallucinatory state. As in the *Trilogy*, the 'pagan' superstitions function as a subversive force within rational thinking.

The second set of superstitions recurring in the text refers to the seals or selkies, the half-human half-seal creatures of the Scottish folk tales.[37] Many of these stories refer to the unhappy unions between a human being and a seal, often ending with the seal's escape to the sea. Other stories simply reflect the human fear of the mammals in stories reproducing the old fight between man

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[35] 'She was a sea-nymph — the daughter of Nereus'. Hayton, *The Governors*, p. 91. Nereus's daughters were called Nereids. See also March, pp. 528-30.

[36] For more information on *Samhain* and the other Celtic festivals, see J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 617-636; Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 177-183; F. Marian MacNeill, *The Silver Bough* (1957-68) (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989), vol. 1, pp. 7-11; G. Webster, *The British Celts and their Gods under Rome* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986), pp. 30-34.

[37] For an extensive study of selkie-lore in Celtic countries see David Thompson, *The People of the Sea: Celtic Tales of the Seal-Folk* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000).

and animal in mythic terms. The mixture of supernatural elements and real facts, typical of all folk legends, is particularly manifest in selkie lore, for seals are not mere animals but, rather, magical creatures whose existence is divided between sea and earth. Real and imaginary sea-mammals are a constant component of the imagery in *The Governors*. Towards the beginning of the novel, Hesione reads a story from a 'really old collection of Scottish short stories' about a heartbroken fisherman and a selkie woman, and on a family outing to the sea, a dead female seal found on the beach is reminiscent of the illustration found in the book of legends: 'The seal seemed to have been trying to get back to the sea when it died. It lay, partly on its side, facing down the beach, its body arched and its head pulled back. The skin round the mouth had dried and shrunk so that the teeth were bared in a grin of agony' (p. 66). The second incident poses a number of questions: does the corpse of the real seal look like the selkie of the legend? Is it blurred by Hesione's world already creeping into Hester's plot? Or is it dictated by her subconscious recollection of the old legend? The significance of the episode is reinforced by the re-occurrence of the seal / selkie motif in an almost identical setting, on a television programme. Featuring an apparently peaceful scene of maternal love between a mother and a baby seal, the harmony of the picture is abruptly destroyed by the intervention of a man clubbing the baby-seal and skinning it. The impact of the scene has a dreadful effect on Hester who has a seizure and faints:

> Her mouth yawned wide as the screen but still no sound issued to drive the pictures out. Instead her mouth started to close round the pictures and although she snatched her head away from the ruined air they forced themselves in under her skull, wet and red, she couldn't bite them off. She could not squeeze them out. (p. 118)

Finally, towards the end of the story, another unusual accident involving the sea and a piece of leather discloses an uncanny link between Hesione's hallucination and the selkie legends: 'It had been clear she had been hallucinating when she grabbed hold of something invisible, shouted something about her father and then stood still with her hand out in front of her. She went

very pale, lashed out with a piece of leather stuff and then went and threw herself into the sea' (pp. 214-15).

The origin of Hesione's journey is revealed, eventually, in the dramatic gesture dictated by the combination of the severe trauma she has been suffering since her father's death and her obsessive identification with the sea-creatures. By identifying herself with the destiny suffered by the selkie trapped on dry land, Hesione throws herself into the realm of her alienated hallucination, in the attempt to find her way through her existence between the magical underwater dream and the 'real' world. Hesione's psychological journey into abyss of her subconscious and her dramatic encounter / identification with the selkies are clear examples of how superstition and folk-belief interact in the dialectic phantasy / fantasy of *The Governors*. Psychoanalysis and superstition coexist throughout the complex narrative of *The Governors*. The dilemma is solved at last as the two plots, and their two heroines, are reunited through a superstition that has haunted Hester/Hesione from her father's death. The void left by Hesione's father's death, the undisclosed mystery of her name and the traumatic experience of a difficult pregnancy have all contributed to Hester's psychological split. The loss of her inner unity has resulted in her psychic alienation and the body / mind conflict. Trapped between the ugliness of the real world and the quirky beauty of a fantastic alter-existence, psychoanalysis and superstition are conjured up together in the making of the dream that Hesione invents for the survival of her self.

In the *Trilogy* and *The Governors* the various uses and manifestations of magic portray conflicts, quests and, ultimately, survival. The immanence of magic in the 'real' world creates complex sets of juxtapositions, where the boundaries between opposed terms gradually become indefinitely blurred and flexible. Nonetheless, the persistent conflicts delineated in the analysis of the four novels are the pregnant symptoms of the divergences between the inexplicable realm of magic, superstition and dream and the seemingly rational order of the 'real' world. From the conflicts arising in the *Trilogy* and *The*

Governors prompts the questioning of ontological and psychological strongholds – the giant's authority, Christian dogmas, the metaphysical boundaries of the 'Otherworld', the coherence of the human mind – and the voyages in search of knowledge, independence and self-fulfilment.

Repeatedly, throughout the texts, transtextual strategies refer to Greek and Celtic myths, traditional folk takes and superstitions, adopted to give a voice to the mysterious forces of magic against the voice of rational order. In the *Trilogy* this is primarily manifested in the opposition between the monks' narratives and the daughters of the mythic giant Usbathaden, where the Christian order represents the established, patriarchal, rational society that clashes with the marginalised, matriarchal, magical sisterhood. Hayton adopts both voices to create tension between the two sides, and articulate the ontological and political issues brought by the encounter of the two worlds. Significantly, the daughters' desire to escape their prison and be part of the real world does not imply that the chosen path towards their integration into the real world is a natural process. Although their unions with human partners signify the partial solution to the conflict between the two worlds, the most crucial question about the metaphysical boundaries of the magical world remains open with the likely possibility of Usbathaden's return.

The Governors integrates Hayton's interest in psychoanalysis with her use of magical tropes, articulating the conflict between the poles of phantasy and fantasy. The episodes and creatures of the magical underwater world disclose their origin from Celtic folk tradition (the selkie stories and birth superstitions) and Greek myth (the myth of Hesione). During her surreal voyage Hester readopts her original name, Hesione, to facilitate her descent into the abyss of her subconscious. As well as folk tradition and ancient myth, the transtextual allusions to psychoanalytical theories elaborated by Freud and Jung suggest a psychological interpretation of the schizoid narrative. *The Governors* merges the magical journey with psychoanalytical notions of rebirth, allowing traditional magic and ancient superstition into the mind of a twentieth-century woman. The result is a process of recuperation.

Conflict is also evident in the paratext of Hayton's novels. The intrusion of monks' fictional glosses and commentaries adjacent to the main texts in the *Trilogy* mirrors the thematic division in the fragmented structure of the text. The cluster of narrative voices interwoven in the narratives amplifies the effect of distortion in the complex structure of the four novels, as Hayton does not build simple dichotomies but multiple sets of opposites. Poststructuralist theories of différance are relevant reading keys, as suggested in Elphinstone's analysis:

> The critic Cixous's deconstruction of binary oppositions (based on Derrida's critique of binary logic) is a relevant yardstick here, as she argues against fixed binary oppositions as being literally 'deathly', and argues instead for a more fluid concept of multiple, heterogeneous *différance*, a *différance* which for her is the measure of genuine women's writing, a writing free from patriarchal hierarchies and oppositional constructions.[38]

In Hayton's narratives several points of view are interwoven, never simply opposed to each other in binary fashion. In fact, these conflicts originate from a complex system of relations – internal or external, real or surreal, historical or contemporary. The multiplication of points of view is also visible in Hayton's experiments with psychological fantasy. Posed between phantasy and fantasy, in *The Governors* the polyphony of voices of the schizoid narrative is amplified by paratextual strategies which, through the use of a varied typeface, convey a further distortion of the main narrative, while the use of epigraphs and illustrations next to the main text contribute to the layered narrative of *The Governors*.

Her writing is an exemplification of what Elphinstone and Cixous refer to as 'genuine women's writing'. In the *Trilogy*, women's thoughts, fears and needs are revealed with neither the frills nor the censorship traditionally imposed by patriarchal institutions, especially at the time of the stories of the *Trilogy*. Though partly mythical creatures, Usbathaden's daughters are not only very human, but epitomise the female struggle to overcome the prison forced upon them. Similarly, Hesione's story highlights the tensions and inner frictions

[38] Elphinstone 1995, p. 107.

of an alienated woman. Only after her magical voyage of rebirth Hesione can genuinely find herself and her life. Beside the conflict is the quest. The purpose of the quest is not limited to the achievement of one goal, but to the understanding of the conflict, the acceptance of the other, unknown, mysterious side of reality. The themes of conflict and quest originate from the characters' desire for self-determination. Only through a better knowledge of themselves and their worlds can the characters achieve their own freedom and fully occupy their own identities. The magical journeys suggest that the characters who commit themselves to making them may develop the will to discover what lies beyond, the capacity to make the world their own and finally, to willingly and resolutely become part of it.

Chapter Five

Liminality and Ghost Stories: The Fiction of Ali Smith

Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères
Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux,
Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères,
Ecloses pour nous sous des cieux plus beaux.

(Charles Baudelaire, from 'La Mort des Amants')

Liminality and Ghost Stories: The Fiction of Ali Smith

Ali Smith's short stories and novels seduce the reader into an open field of interpretation, a hunt for clues, whispered suggestions and ambiguous revelations that lure alert readers through cryptic narrative mazes. Unlike the other authors analysed in this thesis, Smith does not make a manifest use of transtextuality. She does not seek to establish a clear link with the Scottish literary tradition and even her use of intertextuality is much more limited and subtle. Readers are easily lost in the unconventional mazes of Smith's stories, where certainties are wiped out and nothing is secured. Characters' identities are fragile, plots are complex and imagery is mysteriously evocative of the unsaid. Despite this apparent detachment from any traditional context, Smith's poetics arguably discloses similarities with some aspects of the Scottish canon. Her fascination for the paradoxical aspects of human existence links her to relevant Scottish literary examples from the second half of the twentieth century. Authors such as Muriel Spark and Alasdair Gray concentrate on paradoxical and inexplicable situations within seemingly 'realistic' contexts – see Gray's *Lanark* (1981) – or grotesque, absurd, surreal, characters – see, for example, Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1963) or *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). With Gray's work, Smith share preoccupations about the investigation of narrative potential, the desire to explore the human mind and relationships, beyond the conventions of purely realistic fiction and a strong interest in post-structuralist issues of language, especially visible in *Hotel World* (2001). Likewise, what interests Smith in Spark's fiction is, admittedly, 'the mesh of art and life and the visible and invisible qualities of both',[1] a narrative method that merges literary aesthetics with philosophical questions about human existence and our own world. As in Spark's and Gray's fictions, Smith's

[1]Ali Smith, 'Wave your hankie', *Guardian*, 20 March 2004, section Review, p. 27.

narratives question the ability to understand and interpret, while, at the same time, they embrace the immanence of magic in human existence. Her recorded daily-life scenarios conceal paradox and mystery at several levels, as Smith seems convinced that deeper meanings lie beyond and beneath the surface of each individual's existence. Her stories overcome the preconceived boundaries of rational and empirical beliefs. They manifest the will to explore possibilities as they spring from 'the intensity of desire to express the unknowable immensely'.[2] It is the investigation of the irrational corners of the human mind, the focus on the inexplicable episodes of life, in other words – as I choose to define these elements collectively – the immanence of magic in the real world, that establishes a connection between Smith and the other five authors analysed in this study. In Smith's fiction there is an active search for the irrational within the rational, the surreal within the real and the mythic within the human: her stories originate from the coexistence of these paradoxes. This is why Smith's work has been included in this thesis. Her search for the inexplicable mystery of magic in the seemingly rational, realistic fictional world of her narratives, is a persistent feature found, in different ways, in all the authors studied in this thesis. In particular, as in Tennant's or Thompson's stories, in Smith's fiction the uncanny belongs to the deceptively familiar surroundings of normality and daily life. The boundaries between 'reality' and dream, past and present, life and death, progressively crumble from the first collection of short stories *Free Love* (1995) to the disjointed parallel narratives of *Hotel World*.

The Freudian coalescence of the uncanny in the familiar reinforces the bond between Smith's fiction and a distinctively Scottish fantasy tradition. Despite the general absence of specific characters or transtextual allusions to previous literary texts, Smith's fiction bears a strong resemblance to the psychological nature of Scottish fantasy, an essential aspect of Scottish supernatural literary tradition. The majority of Scottish fantasy writing is psychological. From the traditional ballad of 'Tam Lin' up to late twentieth-

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[2] Douglas Gifford, 'Scottish Fiction and Millennial Uncertainty', *In Scotland*, 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 23-29 (p. 33).

century examples, such as Iain Bank's *The Bridge* (1990) and A. L. Kennedy's *So I Am Glad* (1995) – via the nineteenth-century merging of supernatural and human of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) – in Scottish fantasy, the emphasis is always on the uncanny relationship between the supernatural and the 'real' world, on the disturbing closeness of irrational mysteries and rational facts.

The intimate liaison of magic imagination and human psychology, typical of Scottish fantasy writing is also Smith's starting point. A crossing point between the 'marvellous' and the 'uncanny', the liminal space between the two boundary genres bordering the 'fantastic' is at the core of Smith's work. In her fiction, ghosts are seldom 'real'. Nonetheless, the focus of Smith's stories is always the intermediate condition, the passage between life and death, reality and dream, presence and absence. The realm of the undefined allows for a great deal of ambivalence. While the 'real' world often shows contradictory faces, the 'seen' is sinisterly merged with the 'unseen', the non-deciphered and the unknown. Strict boundaries of realism are overcome through the intrusion of 'real' spirits and, more frequently, 'metaphorical' ghosts, in the fashion of past memories and objects that disclose stories from the past. Different forms of spectrality pervade everyday life, whether they are 'real' ghosts, as in Sara's story in *Hotel World*, or merely the result of human forgery, as in the 'handmade ghosts' from the short story 'Instructions for pictures of heaven'.[3] As seen in the introduction to this thesis, ghosts embody paradox: not quite dead, no longer alive, they epitomise the disturbing void of the unknown afterlife. Their borderline existence between life and death, being and not being, past and present is a recurring theme in Smith's short stories and is of paramount relevance in her novel *Hotel World*. Rather than a supernatural concept, liminality is a metaphor for the unfathomable past, the cryptic present and the unknown future, as ghosts always challenge the boundaries of 'known' reality.

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[3] Ali Smith, *Other Stories and Other Stories* (London: Granta Books, 1999). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Witnesses of a past existence or vestiges of an ended relationship, objects often establish fascinating connections between a past that is not quite over and a present that is already past, as in 'A story of folding and unfolding' or in *Like*. Smith's dismantling of the secure categories of time and space is another ambivalent element of her treatment of liminality, particularly manifest in her two novels and crucially in *Hotel World*. When space is persistently haunted by uncanny presences, time also loses any relevance, becoming itself a ghost and haunting characters that are either obsessed or frightened by it.

The treatment of themes such as love, death and afterlife, time and space are often interlinked in Smith's liminal stories. Characters often feel trapped in spaces that no longer belong to them, haunted by their memories and unable to fix their identities, as in the short story 'College' and *Like*. Floating within an undefined and deceptive reality, Smith's ghosts show the fragility of characters lost in worlds (and words) – see Else's inability to speak 'normally' and Sara's engagement with language in *Hotel World* – which they do not understand, any more. Characters' identities sometimes collapse, having lost all they could hold on to survive. Nevertheless, nothing is permanently lost. In Smith's stories, sorrow, frustration and unhappiness are as transitory as everything else is, including death. As in Elphinstone's and Thompson's works, language is primarily concerned with problematic ontological and epistemological issues in Smith's fiction. The inability to understand reality and the discovery of alternative ways of seeing, interpreting, and communicating lurks behind Smith's psychological ghosts. Language can evoke images, situations and give shape to dreams and ghosts, as meanings are multiplied behind the same linguistic signs. Smith plays with Derrida's notion of différance, making language a polyvalent expressive tool with which, one can play, tease and challenge. Through the use of wordplay and other poetic devices, Smith's 'lyric prose poetry' exploits the ambivalence of language to its full extent.[4]

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[4] Douglas Gifford, 'Inventing Solace and Despair', *Books in Scotland*, 55 (1995), 6-11 (p. 9).

Smith's two collections of short stories, *Free Love* (1995) and *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999) deal with all the themes and issues analysed above. Afterlife, coalescence of love and death, ghostly words: these are the general manifestations of liminality in Smith's shorter fiction. Characters are haunted by different kinds of metaphorical ghosts originating in memories, reflections on the past, dreams, bereavement and quirky episodes that disturb daily routines.

Absence is a central theme in the first collection of short stories, *Free Love.* Absence is the main vehicle through which the past arises from the realm of memories. A fine line divides the dead from the living, the former keeping a strong and long-lasting bond with the latter. The strange relationship between the dead and the living fascinates Smith. In 'College', the memory of Gillian Young haunts Alex, who is significantly introduced as 'the dead girl's sister'.[5] The sisters' surname provides a clue to the theme of the story: the paradox of young death. After her sister has passed away, death becomes an incessant worry to Alex, whose angst focuses primarily on morbid ideas:

> How does a blackbird die, does it die in mid-air in a seizure, its heart stopping with a twinge and a rush of fear like if an aeroplane engine were suddenly to cut out in the middle of the sky and the air give way below its wings and the ground come up to meet it? Do they stop being able to breathe, do they panic, do they know? (p. 93)

Obsessive questions about death transform Alex's traumatic bereavement into a phase of universal existentialism. The death of Alex's sister triggers a process of questioning and challenge. Mixed emotions struggle to find a space in her soul: anger towards her immature parents, intolerance against the elderly National Trust lady who dares to have grown so old, and revenge against the roses which epitomise eternity: 'She dismembered all the flowers she could reach without drawing attention to herself, and sat back. Petals covered her feet. In her hand, stuck on one of her rings, was one going black already where

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[5] Ali Smith, *Free Love* (London: Virago, 1995) p. 87. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

it had creased' (p. 100). The mutilation performed on the flowers moves the theme of death into the foreground, for the dismembering of the roses makes Alex a metaphorical Grim Reaper. However, the petals rest on her body, making it resemble an imaginary corpse covered in flowers after a wake. Alex is simultaneously a carrier of death and a victim. More sinister death imagery surfaces in the story as Alex picks up a leaflet about the charitable legacy left by two deceased Siamese twins. Finally, the truth about Alex's emotions is revealed. Hiding in the public toilet, she escapes from her parents' control. Here, in the constricted privacy of the cubicle, the spirit of her sister comes back to life in her thoughts: 'Into her head her sister had come, laughing at her' (p.102). The admission of Gillian's ghost into her mind is followed by Alex's escape to Brighton, where the ghost of the dead sister is only temporarily cast aside, while no clues are given about Alex's future. Is she going back to her parents' home? Or will she be haunting the Pleasuredomes around Britain until she is caught by the police? No answer is found in the text and all the options remain open to a wiser Alex at the end of the story. However crucial for the development of the story, Gillian's death is incidental. The real focus of the story is the effect that her death has on her sister Alex. Her elopement to Brighton is the conclusion to Alex's entrapment in the limbo of her bereavement. The necessity to feel alive, and to prove to herself that she can survive her sister's death is epitomised with another moment of self-reflection. In the final scene, challenging the roaring sea, Alex feels alive again. More importantly, she has acquired awareness of her existence, questioned by her sister's death. The liminal dimension is often the trigger for dramatic episodes. Here, Gillian's death has forced Alex to fight her own self to assert her life.

Absence is also the central theme in 'A story of folding and unfolding'. The story is divided into two parts, separated by different narrative times. At the beginning is the present situation: a man sitting in his bedroom surrounded by ladies' underwear. His loneliness is emphasised by the question: 'What am I supposed to do with all this?'(p.13) Objects are not merely inanimate, but take the role of tactile and visual evidence of a past still hanging over the present. Is

the woman (his wife?) dead? Or has she deserted him? Again, Smith plays with the uncertainty of absence, the liminal legacy left by somebody who is not there any longer:

> The room has the air and the smell of someone who's just left, throwing the last lip print paper tissue crushed into a ball into the tin wastepaper bin, her movement through the room displacing the settled air like a tight breeze in humid weather, but it's winter, and the big light is on, the room is stark, and my father is sitting on the bed looking at his feet on the floor. (pp. 12-13)

The sinister aura of the room speaks of death: the medicines on the bedside table and the personal objects that once belonged to the woman are all still lying about, paradoxical witnesses of her absence:

> Two bedside tables sit on either side of the double bed on which my father is sitting. One has a clock radio and a still tidied store of crime fiction and fishing books, the other has three small pillboxes that, when you open them, have separate compartments for different tablets. Beside these are medicine bottles and pill bottles made of plastic, different sizes arranged beside each other like the architectural model of some complicated building. (p. 12)

The juxtaposition of the two bedside tables is suggestive of the life-death theme in the story. Fishing manuals and crime fiction talk about the present, and the normality of the daily routine, while pillboxes and medicine bottles reveal clues to mental or physical illness. These scattered details betray the sinister suspicion that the woman has recently died. Nevertheless, as in 'College' the woman's death is purely incidental, as the focus is on those who are left behind in the emotional limbo of afterlife.

The second part of the story belongs to the past. The link between the two parts is provided by the same objects and the woman's absence. Several years before, the man had been staring at the same underwear, 'folding and unfolding it'. The neatness, the scent, the texture of the underwear evoked the dream of an unknown, beautiful woman, his wife to be. The game of opening the ladies' lockers has had a different effect on this specific man. While the others are laughing at the state of some of the lockers, feelings of expectation triggered by the objects have thrown the man into a new set of emotions.

Feelings originate from absence and uncertainty in both situations. In the present, the man is uncertain about what to do with the objects left behind. In the past, the unknown lady's underwear had initiated his feelings for her. In both situations, the woman is unseen and unnamed. Her details are carefully left out of the story: the focus is on her absence.

Books, texts and isolated words are broken articulations of Melissa's absence in 'A Text for the Day'. From the beginning of the story, the enormous collection of books creates a claustrophobic atmosphere, while the painstaking care and tidiness are clues to Melissa's almost obsessive love of texts. After her disappearance, the flat is haunted by the dynamics of her dramatic escape. The alphabetically ordered bookcases now have 'gaping holes' like expressionist mouths screaming in despair. The first symptoms of rebellion are these small but significant, disrespectful deeds against the books: 'The bin was full of the ripped-out pages and the empty shell covers of several books. Down the back of the bin, more loose pages on the floor' (p. 22). Melissa is neither dead nor missing. Nevertheless, her disappearance is treated as afterlife and expressed through several references to death: one of the first places Melissa visits is a Gothic-looking cemetery; trespassing in the cemetery by climbing over the gate at night, she virtually transforms herself into a ghost:

> She had scaled the locked gate, swung over the spikes at the top, letting her rucksack thud onto the grass beyond the gravel, and she had landed more or less noiselessly on the other side. Condensation blanked out the windows in the gatehouse. Invisible, silent in the dark, the cold, she made her way to the other side of the graveyard and dropped by a random grave. (p. 24)

In this passage, everything is suggestive of the liminal stage Melissa has chosen to be in: her passage from the living world to the realm of the dead happens 'noiselessly', and Melissa's body is both 'silent' and 'invisible'. The crossing of the boundary between life and death is further emphasised by Melissa's reading of James Joyce's short story 'The Dead' in the graveyard. Though alive, Melissa's defiance of the rules and conventions of life transforms her into a ghost to all that she has left behind: flat, car, her friend Austen and

boyfriend Frank. Having deserted everything and everybody she cared for in her previous life, only one element of continuity remains: her books. Yet, even her love for texts has changed. Texts become disposable, as torn pages, from the novels, poems and stories that had been part of her tidy collection, are disseminated along Melissa's random journeying:

> All the Margaret Atwood, gone, all the James Joyce, the Virginia Woolf, the Hardy, Lawrence, Forster. All the Carter and Rushdie, the Puig and Marquez, the Klima and Levi and Calvino and Milosz, all the Spark and the Gunn and the MacDiarmid, all the Shakespeare, all the Coleridge and Keats, the Whitman and Ginsberg, the Proust, the Eliot, the Scott, the thick books, the thin books, all the one-volume obscure poets and novelists, all the known names and the lesser or unknown lost or forgotten names flying immesurable in the air, settling on the ground like seeds or leaves dropped from the trees, rotting into pieces, blown into the smithereens of meaning. (p. 29)

The textual mutilation reveals an ambiguous desire for the constraints of present existence. The texts, previously trapped in her cluttered bookshelves, are now set free, but ambiguously identified as 'seeds', bearers of a new life, and 'rotting' 'leaves', sinister reminders of organic decomposition, though liberated from the stagnant constrictions of a bound text:

> Pages flutter across motorways or farmland, pages break apart, dissolve in rivers or seas, snag on hedges in suburban areas, cling round their roots. Fragments litter a trail that blows in every direction, skidding across roads in foreign cities, mulching in the wet doorways of small shops, tossed by the weather across grassland and praries. (p. 29)

These fragments of texts trigger a new discovery process, where language becomes a new channel for communication: it seems suggested that Melissa's texts could find new routes and perhaps new readers. In this way the disrespectful act becomes a noble, selfless act of sharing. Mysterious, intriguing words are disseminated throughout different layers of the environment, finding their way through fertile soils, rivers, motorways and foreign cities. These textual fragments speak of Melissa's passage from her previous life into an invisible, anonymous existence. Although she is alive, Melissa has slowly turned herself into a ghost. Nobody would be aware of her existence but the

astonished onlookers who witness the dismembering of books in busy supermarkets and on the streets. No other clue is given about her life. The random spreading of the pages of the books she has destroyed are the only tangible signs of her existence.

A problematic relationship with the past is the main theme in 'Scary'. Here, obsessive love coexists with death. A visit to Tom's ex-girlfriend Zoë and her new boyfriend Richard changes Tom's and Linda's relationship unexpectedly and drastically. Richard's house looks like a sanctuary dedicated to film stars, whose photographs crowd the wall surfaces. In particular, a giant photograph of River Phoenix dominates one of the walls of the old house. Zoë's and Richard's obsession for River Phoenix, whose portraits swarm their house, is made all the more morbid by the actor's recent death. The survival or denial of death is, again, the principal motif: 'this isn't about his death. Death doesn't even touch what we feel for him' (p. 121). As in other stories from Smith's first collection, death is incidental. The feelings attached to the termination of a life are very ambiguous. Rather than bereavement, they trigger extremes of behaviour and suggest a problematic relationship with time and change. None of the characters from 'Scary' can cope with time and all are somehow attached to their past: Linda believes things were much better during her childhood; Tom is clearly still attracted to his ex-girlfriend; Richard's and Zoë's obsession with the River Phoenix myth reveals their inability to accept their past. Phoenix epitomises the myth of eternal youth, passion, a life lived to its full, as Richard admits:

> Because when I see one of his films, when I'm sitting there in the cinema watching him in action, even when I'm watching him on the small screen, I get this feeling that I just don't have enough senses to cope with what I'm being given. Do you know what I mean? I sit there and I wish I had twice, three times as many eyes, eyes all over my body, I wish I had ears all over me, to be able to take it all in properly, the way it should be taken in (p.121).

Like the mythical bird, Phoenix conveys the ultimate commitment to life, a vitality that his death does not take away from his own myth. Phoenix embodies the survival beyond death, reinforcing the weak borderlines between life and

death. Conversely, his attachment to life is paradoxically defeated by the characters' nostalgic attitudes towards their pasts, and their desire to keep them alive forever. In this process, they become less real and less honest towards the ever-changing present. Instead, they prefer the stagnant memory of a ghostly past. The concepts of death and closure haunt the story all the way through. While Richard's and Zoë's bond is based on the obsession for a fragile myth, Tom's and Linda's relationship also appears doomed towards the end of the story. After Tom's theatrical intimate gestures, Linda's escape home on board a new train suggests perhaps her acceptance of the present. The journey, accompanied by the vibrant rhythms of Brazilian music, epitomises Linda's defiant attitude towards her past. Instead, she asserts life in the present time and accepts the inevitability of change.

Reminiscences of the past are often the catalysts of Smith's stories. Memories trigger flashbacks into the characters' pasts, throwing light onto their present. In 'The world with love', the narrator remembers falling in love for the first time with Laura, the new girl from school. The infatuation challenges Sam, the narrator, to follow the girl home and hide behind the hedge to spy on her house, almost haunting her friend's house like a ghost. Laura's mention of the French teacher triggers the flashback narrative that takes the story to its end. Sam's memories recall the gradual growth of her sexual awareness through her fascination with French language. The sensual sounds of the foreign words acquired a deeper meaning and could express feelings otherwise unutterable in Sam's native English. The evocative French words alert Sam to the awakening of her sensuality. The unsaid feelings can only escape her mouth under the spell of French words. Language *is* magic, because some words, evocative of dawning, unuttered fantasies, exercise a charming power: 'Words for the lips, the tongue, the fingers, the eyes, the eyes brown, the hair dark, the horse dark (a joke). Words you could only imagine, words like caresses, les cuisses. That word was enough to thrill you for days' (p. 147). These words are only fragments of the truth that cannot be revealed yet or will never be revealed except in the self-reflective ritual Sam performs in the privacy of her room.

Searching for the foreign words in the pocket French dictionary signals the first act of transgression and, simultaneously, the first time Sam can admit to her own emotions. Words become images and images become feelings. Though they are only ghosts evocative of real sensations, those first emotions could not be any stronger and reveal more about the narrator than anything else.

The ambiguities of language, afterlife and absence are also relevant themes in Smith's second collection of short stories, *Other Stories and Other Stories*. More than in the previous collection, Smith engages with the theme of death, often closely related to love. Once more, death is never the final stage, but, quite the opposite, the opening of a new dimension and of different perspectives. The dialectic relationship established between life and death, present and past, life and memories creates shifting narratives, where rational certainties and realistic narrative conventions are often undermined.

Language is a primary concern of 'Instructions for pictures of heaven', a story about forging, changing, re-shaping the truth. Different points of view and narrative voices fragment the short narrative into three main parts. As the story develops, the epistemological concerns about the semantic effectiveness of language are persistently present. Throughout the story, the meaningless becomes meaningful: the essence of the story is the ambivalence of language. In the first part, an unnamed character coins words out of the letters on registration plates: 'NEG negative. ARG argument. Or argh (but argh is not a real word). BKL buckle. VVE revive. ELR – yes, ELR elevator. DTF doubtful. NEW new. PEW phew. But maybe phew isn't a real word either. PEW periwinkle. Or just pew. Good' (pp. 140-141). The anonymous first-person narrator can read and associate a meaning with anything she sees. Letters on car registration plates all bear cryptic messages, if the mind is receptive and conscious of the magic of language. Letters, sounds and whole words undergo a critical process of deconstruction, their meanings temporarily dissolved, to make room for the endless potential of the imagination. This is how, for example, magic charms are disclosed in the names of clouds:

> Cirrus, stratus, cumulus. They sound like magic words but in reality they are just the name of clouds. Cumulo-nimbus is like smoke. Cumulus-humilis, those are the ones like shreds of something in the sky, that can change their shape in seconds.
>
> You watch them move above you, a mass of old grey wool.
> (p. 141)

Deceptively, the names of clouds sound like charms. The clouds' deceptive magical quality links the first part of the story to the following sections. In the second part, a young woman, Gayle, helps an elderly lady in her house. The overall uncomfortable experience triggers the process of recollection, as Gayle's memory evokes the image of her own grandmother who taught her 'how to do magic':

> In her head the old lady's face shifts and changes. Her house changes. The smell goes, the dirt goes, the town and time change, and Gayle is looking up at her grandmother, who is dead. But this is a long time before she died, and they are in the white-tiled bathroom in the new council-house. Gayle is staying for the week-end. It is a real treat. Her grandmother is showing her how to do magic. (p. 147)

The ghostly memory of Gayle's grandmother, caught in the magical action of shaking the sparks away from a polyester garment, is transposed over the image of the elderly lady. The process of recollection reinforces the related undercurrents of the story, the artificial magic, the power of the imagination, the creative effort and the irrational belief. The grandmother can teach Gayle how to make sparks come out of her jersey, in the days before fabric conditioner: the belief in magic belongs to the past, it is confined to the dimension of memory that can be revived only by the psyche. In the third part, which gives the title to the whole story, a gallery of old pictures shows familiar shots next to historical photographs. The pictures of heaven, portraying the happy faces of anonymous people surrounded by clouds, hide the cynical intention explained in the 'instructions': a technical guide to make your own pictures of Heaven, out of old photographs and wool balls. Guaranteed to be a best seller in wartimes, the artificial concoction alleviates the grief of the unknown fate, of what lies beyond the end. The pictures virtually revive the dead, if people accept to believe in the forgery of the picture makers, and when they choose to accept the forgery, they

prefer the illusion of the pre-fabricated dream to a reality too hard to take in. Deception becomes more relevant than truth in the survival strategies generated by the fear of uncertainty.

Smith's typical preoccupations with death and afterlife return in 'God's Gift'. Here, as often occurs in Smith's short stories, details always hint at underlying themes. A subtly morbid undercurrent pervades the intricate web of past memories and present time. The cats from the neighbourhood are in the habit of donating their prey to the narrator: 'When I got back from Athens there were six mangled dead birds and various other dead things, waiting in the garden for me among the newly opening flowers' (p.3). Paradoxically, dead birds sit next to the blooming flowers, and the closeness of death and life is amplified by the love and death motif throughout the short story: the narrator justifies the cats' behaviour with the belief that they must be in love with her and the odd love ritual performed by the cats is evocative of an experience from the narrator's past. The morbid findings trigger the process of memory, and recall an episode hidden in the past, when an ex-lover had put a stuffed bird in the narrator's bed, as a morbidly affectionate joke.

Fear of death alerts the characters to their attachment to life. Back in the narrative present, when her lover reveals her fear of dying, the narrator reinforces the importance of small gestures and life-asserting moments. In her past, after listening to people talking about death during her visit to the Parthenon in Athens, she has a one-night affair with a stranger. The power of the sensual encounter asserts life again and temporarily exorcises the fear of death. The liminal stage between life and death becomes crucial in the story: when she finds a fledgling still alive, the narrator is concerned to preserve its small life, which is halfway between death and life, and significantly linked to the passage rituals referred to in the story:

> The clay statues of goddesses, their arms out in blessing or cupped in hopeful fruitfulness, and jewellery, valuables, pictures, portraits, cups and trinkets, would be buried with the dead, and the dead would have coins in their mouths, placed on their tongues, to pay their passage to the underworld. I saw rows and rows of those tongue coins in one of the museums. I wonder now whether those particular dead people won't have their passage paid, will still be standing blank-eyed, at one

> side of the river waiting for a boat that never comes, since their coins are in museums now and not in their mouths any more. (p. 9)

The main concern is not about death. The in-between status, the uncertainty, the inter-boundary entrapment are far more disturbing dimensions. The significant relevance of liminality in the story culminates in the enigmatic ending. The fledgling's destiny remains significantly unknown: whether alive or dead, narrator and readers are suspended in the uncertainty, the liminal space of doubt.

In 'The hanging girl', another story from the same collection, death takes a much more surreal twist. The story is divided into two sections, with the ghost of the 'hanging girl' overlapping the two narratives. In the first section of the story, the hanging girl performs a grotesquely surreal show. Her death is the object of several jokes and puns to entertain an imaginary audience:

> I'm your (g)host for this evening morning afternoon and I just know we're going to have a really great time together why did the chicken cross the road? Well wouldn't you if someone wanted to wring your neck? (groans of laughter) why couldn't they hang the insolent girl? Because she had such a – yes – brass neck. (p. 16)

It is only clear in the second part of the story that these surreal monologues take place in Pauline's mind. The hanging girl is a haunting presence in her life, following her around, sitting about in her house, watching television, and so forth. The hanging girl's liminal dimension is the expression of the intermediate state, trapped between life and death, in her adolescence, the growing-up intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. Pauline's life becomes increasingly obsessed with the hanging girl. Her stream of consciousness reveals the indissoluble bond with the hanging ghost:

> You can hang a work of art. You can hang a whole exhibition of works of art. You hang meat until it properly matures, and a jury or a parliament can be hung.
>
> You can hang on somebody, on his or her every word, and something can hang on, depend on, something or someone else. (pp. 31-32)

The morbid word play discloses Pauline's mental disintegration, and her suicide is the foreseeable ending to her delusions. Details scattered in the story – the reference to an article about the pilots' last words before crashing or the morbid jokes about famous people's last words – reinforce the sinister aura of the story. As in many others of Smith's stories, in the morbid marriage of death, the closer death approaches a character, the more the character appreciates life. In Pauline's last words:

> For a moment it's true, I was falling free, suspended by nothing.
> Christ but something's really aching somewhere.
> God, though, what a beautiful day. (p. 35)

A similar appreciation of life's good things, such as a beautiful summer's day, is abruptly interrupted by an insect invasion in another story of the collection, 'Small Deaths'. The small creatures have conquered the house and the mass killing that follows is no less morbid than any other death omen. The partial success of the first remedy leaves some of the bugs still alive, floating in cups of tea and intruding the narrator's body: 'That evening, while we were watching an old horror film on television, I picked one, black and juicy and healthy, off the inside of my upper lip' (p.73). In the image conjured up is the morbid bond of love and death: the narrator's 'lip' is transposed into a corpse that the healthy bugs thrive on. Life (or love) and death feed off each other: in order to preserve their lives and the lives of their pets, the narrator and his partner become responsible for thousands of 'small deaths'. Moreover, the title of the short story translates almost literally from the French 'petite mort', a metaphor, which traditionally summarises the coalescence of love and death: 'love and death are linked, from the French notion of orgasmic small death through the metaphysical poets all the way to something Winterson sums up in the perfect opening sentence, in *Written on the Body* : 'why is the measure of love loss?'[6] Love and death merge the boundaries of physical sensations and metaphysical questioning, as love questions the definite termination of life. In

[6] 'Interview with Ali Smith', see Appendix.

Smith's stories the persistent coexistence of love and death challenges the categorical boundaries that separate life from death and, paradoxically, it is the sinister aspects of daily incidents that assert life. In 'Small Deaths', the bug attack is made more sinister by its idyllic setting, when the couple are in a blissful state of harmony with each other and at peace with the world: 'Halfway through the summer the weather suddenly got better, hotter. For nearly a week the air was hot, hanging in the house as thick as smoke, hanging around the garden curling and deadening leaves. I love it, you said. I love this weather. I love you' (p. 69). The sinister omens lurking behind the 'deadening leaves' foresee the disruption of the peaceful scenario with the appearance of a 'small striped insect'. After a few days they 'woke up to them everywhere in the house' (p. 70). Daily incidents are magnified into the expressionist image of a surreal scenario, as harmless creatures are turned into a horrific force threatening life and well being. Smith multiplies the effects of 'small deaths' and disfigures the blissful harmony of the first scene with the intrusion of more sinister details: 'Down there between the rucks of dust, deep in the shoddy globules of carpet, the choking corpses, the choked hatchings of their eggs' (p.73). In the end, the dying bugs are like ghosts, liminal creatures likely to haunt the protagonists of the story and their house even after the insecticide's magical effect:

> The insecticide, however, if applied properly, would last seven months. [...] Luckily for us out there on the wall, the rain of the past few days had stopped. Luckily, it was quite a dry evening.
> You looked at your watch. Twenty-six minutes to go, you said. We sat in the low evening sun and waited for the twenty-six minutes to pass. (p. 74)

The repetition of the adverb 'luckily' and the mention of the number 'seven' emphasise the superstitious nature of the ritual, almost as if the effectiveness of the insecticide relies more on the belief in its magical power. The intermediate status in which the insects (and the characters) are trapped is recorded by the typical ending of Smith's stories. Not dead yet and probably not fully alive, the bugs are travelling between life and death as narrator and partner sitting on the borderline marked by a wall, wait for the time of reaction to pass.

Sometimes, the fascination with the unknown initiates teasing games and identity swapping. An unexpected gift of flowers opens the scene of 'Blank Card'. A sinister aura pervades the flowers: the narrator tears the wrapping with a kitchen knife; the delivery boy mentions funerals as part of the flower business; the smell of flowers becomes more potent as soon as the narrator realises they are not from her lover, but from a mysterious admirer.

The rotting process accentuates the sinister fear of death, originated from the suspicion that the flowers are a 'warning', as the label advises. A gesture of love is transformed into a death message. The possibility arises that a stranger might be obsessed with the narrator. Yet, this suspicion remains ambiguous and unresolved. Uncertainty, again, is the focus of the story and the force that governs the characters' actions. The threat makes the narrator more aware of her body, excited at the thought of being the victim of voyeurism. The narrator and her partner experience an increase in their sexual drives, likely triggered by fear and the excitement of a game where the rules are unknown.

At the end of the story, the partner's phone-call inverts the roles. The narrator wonders whether her partner is aware of the recipient of the call: 'It was only after I hung up that I wondered if the you you believed you were talking to on the phone was definitely me after all' (p. 48). Identities are no longer fixed, but characters change and swap roles in a surreal, double blind game. Significantly, the narrator rescues the flowers she had previously thrown away, trying to revive the half-dead stems, before she takes on her new role. Conscious of her new identity, the narrator takes the initiative and sends flowers to her partner's office:

> I washed my hands and called the flower shop back. I acted like a new person. I don't think the girl recognised me.
> I'd like to send some flowers, I said. I told them your work address, and gave them my credit card number.
> Just leave it blank, I said. She'll know who they are from. (p. 49)

The anonymity of the final gesture leaves room for interpretation. After her symbolic Pilate-like gesture of washing her hands, the narrator is able to take on a new persona and join in the game of identity swapping. Doubts linger in

the suspended atmosphere of 'Blank card', and although there is no overt reference to death, the suspicion remains that there might be something morbid behind the mysterious gift and the playful game which follows. Smith's stories often bring forward the paradoxical union of love and death. Here, a blank message accompanying a bunch of flowers triggers a hunt for the culprit, searching the past and the present for possible clues.

Tales of love and death often lurk behind the surface of people's lives in Smith's stories. An intricate plot of flashbacks and different points of view gives the title to 'More than one story', where voyeurism links an old man and a neighbour sunbathing on the roof of her flat. Both characters indulge in their thoughts, slowly moving from their current situations to past memories surfacing in their minds. Sexual encounters from their reciprocal pasts are the shared subject of the two flashbacks. The old man wonders about Olive, a girl from his youth. The ghostly memory is linked to a specific episode when Olive had warmed the boy's hands against her naked breasts in a parody of a resuscitating practice suggesting the sinister closeness of the coldness of death and the warmth of his first erotic experience. Slightly more morbid is the neighbour's recollection of her own encounter with Sharon Neil. In the flashback narrative the two girls experience love in the back of a car, on a hill close to the building site of a crematorium. Ironically, the crematorium site is a magical place. Cars move with their engines off. Is it a haunted place? Or 'an invisible force field'? The doubts are left open while the memories of these magical, uncanny moments are forever associated with their secret relationship.

Secrecy, uncertainty, mystery, uncanniness: all these manifestations of liminality are a central part of Smith's stories. Both collections of short stories combine real scenarios with surreal events, while sinister feelings arise from the disturbing voids left by absence, death, or simply uncertainty. The indefinite situations and the unfinished stories pervade these short narratives and challenge the readers' desire to comprehend what lies beyond their boundaries.

Recollections of the past are crucial in Smith's first novel, *Like* (1997). The broken memories of the past surface partially through the first part of the novel – Amy's narrative – while, the second part – Ash's narrative – discloses more details through a different perspective. Between the two narratives is the liminal space, the uncertainty about the present and the voids left about Amy's past, as the structural division accentuates the inconsistencies between the two versions of the story, rather then filling in the gaps left open in each narrative.

Mystery surrounds Amy's present condition. The identity of Amy's daughter's father is unknown, while her reading disability is incongruous with her academic past. Subtle clues, vague references and hidden suggestions reveal the ghostly contours of a confused past. Amy's final words at the end of her narrative in *Like* reveal only the faintest reference to her encounter with Ash at the moment of her cathartic burning of her books and, significantly, of her diary: 'everything goes back to its original colour when you burn it, it goes back to being white [...] Ash, that's all. Nothing else'.[7] Concealed in the last nihilistic remark, is the reference to Ash, the girl with whom Amy has shared an important and still undisclosed part of her life.

Ash's narrative fills some of the mysterious voids left in Amy's story. Like Amy's narrative, this second part is crowded with recurring references to the ghosts from the past. The past is an alien dimension, hauntingly clinging to the present. For Ash, being back home is 'ghost-ridden' (p.338), but memories no longer belong to Ash, who has grown detached from them: 'ghosts and ghosts and ghosts. Ghosts and dust, the dust of it all I'm disturbing up here' (p. 220). Despite their desire to detach themselves from their pasts, in both narratives characters are constantly haunted by past memories. Places, in particular, play an important role in the building of an uncanny relationship with the past: references to the Brahan Seer – 'ancient highland magician of the greatest of powers' (p.158) – and haunted places recorded in the story reinforce the concept of a ghostly past; Kate, Amy's daughter, talks about ancient burials; to

[7] Ali Smith, *Like* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 152. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Kate, at her grandparents' house, Amy's room 'is like magic' (p.81), full of memories about her mother's past life. Similarly, Ash's temporary residence in an old disused theatre in Cambridge turns Amy and Ash into haunting spirits:

> Oh, she whispered, your theatre is a ghost theatre.
> Yeah, I said, I think it is.
> But it's you and I who are the ghosts, she said. It's you and I who are haunting it. (p. 255)

Magic and mystery pervade Amy's and Ash's secretively shared past. Formerly an academic, Amy is now unable to read. Her disability suggests a mystery behind the dramatic end to her promising career. Through Ash's journey into the past and the few hints in Amy's narrative, sections of her past are recollected. Ash's desire to dig into the past is, however, an ambiguously creative effort. The possibility of changing things is a strong temptation from the beginning of her attempt to reconstruct the story: 'Dear liary [sic], I like this game. Giving a shape to things that didn't actually have a shape at the time, or didn't seem to' (p.169). Language is a crucial issue in *Like*. Both characters and both narratives reveal two phases in their approach to language issues: loss and recovery. In the first phase, both characters lose any faith in the possibility of communication through language. Amy's inability to read suggests her refusal to acknowledge a part of her life. Her choice to abandon books seems dictated by a progressive loss of faith. Language, the instrument she, as an academic, has learnt to mould to her own needs, is soon revealed in its inability to convey meanings. This is what Ash recalls of a paper given by Amy at university: 'But I remember what she said. That language was meaningless, that words were just random noises. [...] Since language was only an act, a performance, since words were by nature all fiction, words could never express anything but the ghost of truth' (p. 269). Language can only express 'the ghost of truth'. Words seem to have lost their power. Yet, paradoxically, Amy's only way to prove her theories of language is to exploit words and their persuasive power. Her arguments already contain the core of what happens later: the intellectual crisis. The ambivalence of language cannot be accepted and yet

cannot be completely abandoned. With the background provided by Ash's narrative, Amy's reflections upon language become more meaningful: 'The words go round and round with the same cracks of space between them. The lines tack themselves round like crockery being smashed' (p.12). Language is broken and has lost its unity and coherence. Amy cannot communicate in a conventional way any longer. Her disability conceals a different approach to language and communication. Language becomes itself a ghost, like her past love.

Later, however, in the second phase, the strength of language is regained, and its ambiguities accepted as part of the creative process of thinking and story telling. After its critical phase, language opens itself to a multiplicity of possibilities. As in the short stories, Smith seems to be aware of Derrida's theories of deconstruction. Language is subject to change, it is a living creature, born with a new freshness through Amy's and Kate's eyes. Through the child's perspective language is turned into a game of discovery, highlighting its organic, living, metamorphic nature: 'It's funny how letters that make up words can look like people' (p. 26). Just like people, language is not a static entity. It has broken free from the stiff, preconceived categorical structures to become the simple magical language of children.

If language can have infinite potential, censorship becomes the painful carrier of revelation. The parallel references to Amy's diary in both narratives reveal the diverging paradoxes of their relationship. Just before the ceremonial burning of her diary, Amy's admission that 'Ash [is] all over her [Kate]' indicates the lingering presence of Ash in Amy's life; on the other hand, Ash's fear that in Amy's diary there is no mention of her own name throws her into an existential crisis. The unforgivable omission leaves their relationship in the vague territory of unwritten memories. Writing something down is identified with security: 'Write in the sand and let the sea smooth it away. Write it on paper then hold a match to the corner. Write it in a book and shut the cover. Bury it in a garden or send it through the post to a place that doesn't exist'. (p. 309) Instead, the unwritten

fluctuates in the limbo of uncertainties, and language becomes the prime object of revenge for Ash when she imagines her setting fire to the Library:

> Not a word, not a thought, not a syllable. Not once did I get the mention. I wasn't there, anywhere. She'd left me out.
> Now I turned and saw the sky was lit up behind me. The sight of it. The smell on the wind. The charred pages. The historic place of burning. I'd done that, me.
> That's get into her diary, then, if nothing else did. (p. 304).

The language of centuries of tradition is destroyed, burnt and finally turned into 'ash'. Her fantasy of revenge significantly mirrors Amy's real gesture at the end of her own narrative. In both situations, the real or imaginary cathartic burning of books signals the breaking with the past. A new cycle is about to start and Ash feels reborn with a new ability to speak and give voice to her thoughts: 'The past was past. I would make something of myself. Now I could. Now I had fire cracking my skull, a tongue of fire. Now I could speak the languages of the beasts'. (p. 306) In a re-enactment of Pentecost, Ash, like the Christian Apostles, is invested with the full power of language with 'a tongue of fire'. Her awareness that a new life is starting is made possible by the acceptance that the past belongs to the past. At the same time, language is not a trapped entity any longer, but has broken free.

The two narratives follow the movement of language from a negative source of lies and misconceptions into the organic concept of living expression. In the end, language is accepted to be deceptive. It is its deceptiveness, however, that epitomises its creative power, the infinite potential enclosed in the system of signs used to communicate. The ambiguous polyvalence of language is manifested through impossible communication between Amy and Ash. Their identities attempt to merge together in a totalitarian relationship, but the truth is that they never quite belong to each other. Like their narratives, they are two separate identities, and conscious of the fragility of their relationship and their own identities. The love scene between the two characters, found only in Ash's narrative, is the only moment when the barriers are lowered, and, paradoxically, signals the moment of ultimate awareness, when Amy and Ash come to terms

with the impossibility of their relationship: 'We're the laughing earth and its wonders. The centre of the universe, planets spinning round our heads. The whole solar system in dripping heat and light. We're how you start a fire, and we're burning. We're nothing' (p. 299). Temporarily, the intensity of their love overcomes the physical, contingent boundaries, conventions and barriers of the present situation. The climactic union signifies the strength of this unique moment, the characters' successful attempt to break conventions and barriers. The planetary metaphor expresses the feeling of excitement, the belief that their union is the centre of everything, the absolute force within the universe. Nonetheless, it is also the epiphany that their future is doomed from the start. Its 'absoluteness' is also its 'nothingness': it makes it impossible, unutterable, a secret that both characters will only share in their separate, parallel lives. Questions inevitably arise about the truthfulness of Ash's account. Did the love scene ever occur? Or is it another one of Ash's unfulfilled fantasies? The imaginary aspect of the tale suggests Ash is again forging a truth for herself. The vagueness of the scene leaves Ash's and Amy's relationship in an undefined limbo. Its ghost will haunt them, transform their lives and, one suspects, die with them.

Like is a complex novel. The language issues that underlie the two narratives articulate the themes of impossibility, uncertainty and unutterability. Love is impossible because communication is impossible. Identities fluctuate, as signified by the characters' names. Amy's life, for example, appears daunted by her family name from the start of her narrative: 'Amy Shone. A surname like that will haunt all your life' (p. 4). But signifiers do no longer fit their signified, with Amy's abandoning of a promising academic career and ending up working in a campsite, unable to read. The remark on her surname stresses the irony of her life, the fragility of identity and the ambiguity of language. Conversely, her daughter Kate does not have a birth certificate: her name is not registered anywhere, implying that Amy's daughter does not officially exist. Kate is free from the pressures carried by a fixed identity and is almost an outlaw, not conforming to any type of social control. Her namelessness becomes the

epitome of the language revolution delineated before: free from any name-led constraints, Kate can be anybody and choose to be anybody. Ash's name, too, conceals ambiguities and discloses Smith's playful experimenting with language. Significantly, Ash is short for 'Aisling', a noun for a dream poem in the Gaelic tradition. Beside the visionary connotation suggested by the full name, the shortened version, 'Ash', is strongly evocative of the remains of death rituals. The lifeless remains of a fire, ash is what is left when Amy destroys all her books in the most cathartic moment of her life. Paradoxically, Ash is not just 'like a little person all made out of ash. [...] No, [...] much more substantial than that. Like a tree'. Amy's letter becomes a poetic interpretation of her friend's name and the first declaration of language's infinite potentials: ash is a magical tree – the rowan tree – but also 'the dust or the remains of anything burnt; volcanic dust, or a rock composed of it' (p. 224). The ambiguous fusion of life and death in Ash's oxymoronic name is also reinforced by its juxtaposition to Amy's name, meaning 'beloved'. But if Amy is 'love', Ash must be 'death' and belongs to the realm of ghostly creatures and indefinite identities like most of Smith's characters. Her identity escapes definition and yet this is all that needs to be known, as suggested by Amy's crucial ending to her narrative: 'Ash, that's all. Nothing else' (p. 152).

As the characters' names endorse the ambiguous uncertainties of their existences, throughout the novel all categorical absolutes collapse and identities crumble. Words betray characters' expectations and love is but a ghost lost in memories. Published between the two collection of short stories, *Like* contains the complex themes and issues already seen in Smith's shorter fiction. The present is impalpable and deceptive, while memories from a secretive past slowly creep in. The novel is fragmented into different time-settings through the use of flashbacks, and distorted further through the double perspective of the narrative points of view. Though laying bare the deceitfulness and precariousness of language, Smith explores new routes in the potential of each narrative.

Complex relationships with time and language, fragmentation, instability: all these aspects in Smith's first novel are developed further in *Hotel World* (2001). Sara Wilby's spirit, a 'conventional' ghost, haunts the parallel stories that make the narrative of *Hotel World*. Love and death are forever linked in Sara Wilby's short life, as they often are in Smith's short stories. Liminality is again a central theme: even after her own death, Sara's spirit continues to haunt characters and places. Each chapter heading is a grammatical tense – 'Past', 'Present Historic', 'Future Conditional', 'Perfect', 'Future in the Past', 'Present' – as Smith's typical flashback technique is heightened: different, parallel tenses are mixed, while time, simultaneously, loses linearity and becomes a thoroughly relative concept. Language, too, is increasingly a critical issue, Smith's experimental style is taken to further extremes: puns, wordplay and metaphors cluster the parallel narratives and again pose questions about the universality of language categories.

Even before her death, Sara experiences her existence as a liminal, invisible being. Just before her accidental death due to a fatal fall through a dumb waiter at the Global Hotel, Sara already feels invisible after falling in love with the girl at the watch shop: 'Falling for her had made me invisible'.[8] Sara is already trapped in a liminal dimension before she falls down the lift. The pun on the double meaning of the verb 'fall' adds irony to the story, while the play of words stresses the intimate closeness of love and death. Although not yet dead, Sara feels her body disappearing while passing the girl on the street. Ironically, only as a ghost she finally attempts to establish contact with her, towards the end of the story. The coexistence of past and present often occurs with afterlife. Memory of the dead never deserts the living completely. Instead, afterlife establishes a liminal continuity between life and death. In 'Future in the Past', the narrative of Sara's sister, Clare Wilby, the void left by her sister's sudden death is made even more upsetting by the father's efforts to erase every clue about his late daughter's existence. His desire to delete Sara from his world

[8] Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 23. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

expresses his inability to accept death, and an attempt to annihilate its consequences in life. Death, however, is not easily deleted. Traces of the recently deceased constitute the undefined area often at the core of Smith's stories. As in many other stories, some imperceptible details are inevitably neglected and they become proof of the coalescence of life and death. The bereaved sister can only hang onto those ghostly witnesses to Sara's past life:

> There are the dents left in the carpet they prove it was there if you put your hand down and feel you can feel the dips where the feet of the bed were and there was all dust down the back of it that he hoovered up they told us in Biology that a lot of dust is made of human skin so if that is true then some of Sara is in the hoover. (p. 191)

Death leaves its witnesses wondering about the meaning of life and the intriguing possibilities of afterlife. With the ghost of Sara suspended in limbo between the world of the living and an afterlife dimension, the novel starts with a paradox: 'Here's the story; it starts at the end' (p. 3). Although not all chapters of the novel follow the script of a ghost story, the memory of the recently dead haunts it from the beginning, creating several underground links between all the characters. While the living are constantly haunted by thoughts of death and afterlife, the ghost speaks from her dimension, commenting on, and witnessing the world that she used to inhabit, from a different perspective. Memories of past life obsess Sara, just as they obsess her relatives, friends and colleagues who are still mourning her. Her liminal condition forces her to cling to any detail stored in her mind which might enable her to establish a connection with the last few days of her existence. In the desperate effort to remind her own spirit of her former physical life, Sara's trapped soul struggles to keep her memory alive, and apparently unimportant things become crucial in her desperate hunt for clues: 'Beautiful dirt, grey and vintage, the grime left by life, sticking to the bony roof of a mouth and tasting of next to nothing, which is always better than nothing' (p. 5).

Anything is better than not being. Sara's ghost keeps tormenting everybody, including her own self, to discover more about her past. Mere details such as the duration of her fall become central to her search for clues to

fill in the holes of nothingness. Nothingness, emptiness, vacuums: these images are constantly repeated throughout the narrative. The concept of 'nothingness' can turn into something quite ironic, as Else observes in the 'Present Historic': 'Who needs a pence? Fucking nobody who's anybody. That's quite funny, the idea of fucking a nobody, just a space there where a body might be, and yourself flailing backwards and forwards against the thin air' (p. 35). The metaphorical sexual encounter with nobody epitomises the role of liminality in *Hotel World*. Nothingness is the starting point of the story, the central issue for all characters in *Hotel World*. Being nothing equals lack of definition, uncertainty and inability to communicate. Nothing is real. Space and even more so, time, lose their objectivity to become merely relative concepts.

Sara's inability to accept her own death questions the concepts of past and time. Time and space lose any stable application and become inconsistent features. The name of the hotel, 'Global', is clearly a metaphor. All action takes place around the Global Hotel: Sara had just started working there before her accident; the watch shop is across the road from the hotel; Else, the tramp-lady, begs not far from the Global; Penny is a client of the Hotel; Clare goes back to the hotel to trace the last instants of her sister's death. The hotel is a stage for everyday life. It encloses different sets of characters that would not normally mix with each other. It lowers the barriers and causes encounters, episodes, dreams: everything spins around the Global Hotel. The world is made smaller and simultaneously larger: a whole universe embodying life and death, young and old, professionals and beggars, parents and children, romantic infatuations and cheap sex. The Global encloses all these extremes and all the grey areas in between. At the same time, the hotel walls cease to be stable boundaries between different social groups but become thresholds to be crossed.

Space is simultaneously compressed and dilated in the narratives of *Hotel World*. Likewise, time becomes problematic. Ironically, time has become slower on Sara's watch a few weeks before her death. After she takes her watch to the repair shop, time measuring ceases to matter for Sara altogether. She keeps delaying the collection of her watch from the repair shop. Time

becomes essential to evaluate her feelings, to examine her present situation in the light of a new discovery:

> I had been gazing, without even realizing, at the shape of her body, at her stomach and the place where her pants covered her, and I had been thinking about what the girl in the watch shop's body would look like if it didn't have any clothes on it. (p. 22)

Time plays a crucial role in Sara's development and her sexual awareness. Her death interrupts the process, leaving Sarah's ghost and the girl at the shop wondering about what could have been. When the watch has not been claimed back, the girl starts to wear it and discovers that 'S. Wilby' and herself have the same wrists. The delicate detail is full of all the potential for a story that will never happen, because Sara's time is up. Paradoxically, after her death, Sara finally finds the courage to confront the girl at the shop and merges her spirit into the girl's body, in a surreal first and last sensual encounter:

> I found a shop with its windows full of watches. A girl sat by herself, leaning an arm on the glass top of the counter. Below her were watches. She was staring at the front of her wrist where the moving hand on the face of her watch leapt and stopped, leapt and stopped, leapt and stopped.
>
> I passed through her. I couldn't resist it. I felt nothing. I hope it was the right shop. I hope she was the right girl. (p. 29)

The uncertainty of the episode and the possibility that it might have been the 'wrong' girl signify the ghost's lingering attachment to life, despite the categorical absence of physical sensations. This final episode is in the first chapter of the novel, but the last chapter will reveal an important detail – that the girl is wearing Sara's watch – which repeatedly leaps and stops, underlining the uncanny aura of the episode. Even before she passed away, time has lost any rational significance, to foreshadow the endless eternity of afterlife awaiting Sara.

Time concerns all characters in *Hotel World*. The headings of the chapters all stress close links between characters and time. Sara occupies, obviously, 'Past', while her sister Clare is projected into 'Future in the Past'. A paradox in the concept of time, 'Future in the Past' suggests that after Sara's

death time has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis for Clare. The crucial changes in Clare's life are reflected in the loose structure and paratext of the chapter. The lack of punctuation and the irregular blank spaces between words and paragraphs convey Smith's intention to record Clare's thoughts without interfering. Like a stream of consciousness, the monologue follows Clare's disconnected thoughts. Her reflections are clustered with obsessive references to time and ghosts: after Sara's death, the mother has turned virtually into a ghost, while the father has hoovered his daughter's memory away from the house and his mind. To Clare, instead, Sara is still alive, the boundaries between life and death blurred in the paroxysm of her grief. 'Bits' of her deceased sister are still visiting her, and her sister's ghost has access to the most remote places: the underwear drawer, the carpet of their bedroom, and, ultimately her mind. Clare's monologue is in fact a dialogue with her dead sister, as she paradoxically admits:

> I am going fucking mad talking to a dead person who's dead & can't hear anything and here I am talking to it telling it jokes for fuck sake I am losing my mind would Clare Wilby's mind please report to customer services it's me that's the joke I am such a joke still my heart is going so fast about something it is racing away ahead of me it is kind of amazing because I talk to her all the time now we never used to talk at all hardly ever but now all the time I can't get my head round it if someone is dead they can be more alive than they are when they are actually like alive. (p. 210)

The paradoxical proximity of life and death is endorsed by Clare's admission that her sister is more alive now than she ever was during her life. Paradoxically, Sara's ghost has made her more real to her sister than ever. These ironic links between life and death are reinforced throughout the chapter. After her sister's death, Clare starts a frantic time-hunt. Wearing Sara's uniform, she is determined to revive her sister, return to the past and relive the last moments of Sara's life. Ironically, Clare discovers that Sara had managed to beat time at the moment of her death. The demon that had haunted the last part of Sara's swimming career is finally exorcised:

> Listen Sara even though you couldn't even though you couldn't move couldn't do anything about it listen to me you were fast you were

> really fast you were really really fast I know because I went there to see tonight I was there & you were so fast I still can't believe how fast you were less than four seconds just under four & a bit that's all you took I know I counted for you. (pp. 220-1)

The speed record beaten by Sara at the moment of her death emphasises the obsessive relationship with time. There is an understated irony and poignancy in this. There is a tragic recognition of death as fact, but also an almost comic, darkly absurd quality to Clare's urgent address to Sara. The inability to accept that the past is over causes Clare to hunt for clues to demonstrate that not everything is gone, that something of her sister still continues to live. Time stops being an objective chain of events. The time capsules mentioned in 'Future in the Past' reinforce the tension between the unchangeable safe memories of the time capsules and the unknown eternity lying ahead of Sara's spirit.

For Lise, who has just finished working at the Global, time has lost any meaning and she has lost the ability to define herself. In 'Future Conditional' time is a category with no meaning, a point of reference that no longer exists. This disappointing awareness epitomises Lise's inability to rationalise her life through the regular time units she once used to be aware of: 'How many minutes were there in an hour? That's something she used to know, like people just know things. How many hours in a day, and weeks in a year? That was the kind of thing children knew, the kind of thing you were never supposed to forget in a lifetime' (p. 81). Lise's existence is timeless. Her mental breakdown has blurred her ability to think and understand. To her, time is real only when she can visualise it on the computer screen, eagerly watching the minute digits during the instantaneous change:

> The clock on the computer reads 6:51 p.m., but at the very moment she glances at it the black 1 changes to a 2.
> 6:52 p.m.
> She is pleased to have seen it happen. It feels meant. (p. 101)

Time exists only in the past and in the realm of Lise's memory. Her rebellious act of removing the badge that identifies her as an official member of staff marks the beginning of her identity crisis. Furthermore, Lise's desire to escape, to be somewhere else and somebody else coexists with an intolerance towards

time. Lise realises that 'Time is notoriously deceptive. [...] Because time seems to move in more or less simple linear chronology, from one moment, second, minute, hour, day, week, etc. to the next, the linear sequence which itself translates into easily recognizable significance, or meaning' (p. 103). The reliable linearity of time disintegrates with Sara's death. The end to Lise's work shift is delayed and her system of beliefs starts to collapse. The rational order of time and of Lise's life gradually stops to make sense. Nothing is under control when time passes by and its only witness is Lise's inability to cope with her life.

'Perfect' discloses time concerns relative to Penny, who cannot wear watches, as their mechanisms do not work properly around her wrist:

> Because I'm one of those people who can't wear them, listen, this is true. Whenever I put one on, whenever I have one anywhere near my body for any length of time, not just on my wrist, but even if I've got it in my pocket or in my bag, if it's a digital one its numbers go completely mad, flashing and speeding up. A fuse or something blows, whatever it is inside the watch. Ordinary watches, the wind-up kind, even watches that already behave completely normally on other people's arms, won't work on mine, I had one that went so fast that it looked like I was passing whole hours while other people's watches had gone for ten or fifteen minutes. (p. 146)

Penny, reminiscent of Homer's Penelope as she attempts to deceive time, is a professional liar, writing for a second-rate paper, significantly named *The World*. In her last piece, her review of the Global Hotel, she praises the hotel just after her a nightmarish encounter with Clare. For Penny, lying is compulsive. More than anybody else, her deceptiveness is self-harming. Far from being 'Perfect', as suggested in the title, her anxiety to be successful borders on insanity, as reinforced by her uncanny relationship with time and watches. These two kinds of deceptiveness are reflected in her story: a series of uninterrupted thoughts and lies in a continuum where time (deceptively) seems to stretch.

The loss of time coherence permeates all the stories of *Hotel World*. The parallel stories follow independent chronological orders with subtle games of cross-references and anticipation: Else's narrative is anticipated by Sara's story; Lise appears in Else's and Clare's story; both Clare and Else reappear in Penny's story, while the girl from the watch shop mentioned at the beginning by

Sara returns at the very end. Each story follows its own path, oblivious of what has come before and what will come later, leaving readers to re-order the events in chronological sequence, if they so wish.

Equally deceptive throughout the parallel stories of *Hotel World* is language. In the novel, language is never a fixed system of signs. In Sara's afterlife signifiers escape signs in a Derridean linguistic chaos. Yet, the ghost is desperate to fix meanings and recuperate lost words: 'I want to ask her the name again for the things we see with. I want to ask her the name for heated-up bread' (p. 26). The restless search for simple words such as 'eyes' and 'toast', to trace the last episodes of her life is Sara's ultimate expression of her liminality. Trapped in the intermediate dimension, between the living world and the afterlife, Sara is desperate to express her self, to attribute a meaning to her new existence. Language is the only tool she is left with, to try to keep a bond with her former existence: 'Now that I'm silent forever, haha, it's all words words words with me' (pp. 5-6). But her words escape memory. Sara is unable to think and tell her story in a conventional way, relying on past knowledge. Readers are challenged to imagine, interpret and even suggest the missing words to the speaking voice of the ghost. Readers are prompted to whisper clues when the ghost searches her memory of the word for 'the things she saw with' (p.12). The ghost clings to her ability to speak for as long as she can, because language is all she is left with, the only link she holds to the world of the living. In this sense, to Sara language is everything. Words are all that connect her to the world. In fact, words *are* her world. To be out of words equals to be out of the world, as expressed by the intense suggestiveness in the last passage of her story, marking its desperate, poignant appeal to the reader: 'I will miss the, the. What's the word? Lost, I've, the word. The word for. You know. I don't mean a house. I don't mean a room. I mean the way of the . Dead to the . Out of this . Word' (p. 30). The ghost's gradual detachment from her former life is reflected in the slow, inexorable disintegration of her language, progressively reduced to small, disjointed fragments, highlighted by the typographic distance between words.

Parallel to Sara's gradual loss of language, in the second chapter, 'Present Historic', Else's language is reduced to her own short hand. Words have evidently lost universal meanings and conventional use:

> She imagines the pavement littered with the letters that fall out of the half-words she uses (she doesn't need the whole words). She imagines explaining to the police, or to council road-sweepers, or to angry passers-by. I'll clear up after me, she tells them in her head. It's just letters. Anyway, they are biodegradable. They rot like leaves do. (p. 47)

Language is significantly perceived as an organic being. Like a living creature, words can 'rot' and disintegrate in a psychological landfill. Words are not whole, only fragments of the original language. Else has mutilated her words, maybe because people have cut off her ability and trust. The letters she imagines scattered across the road are the broken form of the only language she knows. In Smith's words:

> To Else it's not an alternative, it's all she's left with of language. She can't, isn't capable of, using it like other people, who have full power over it. For her, language has changed, words are emptied and different from other people's, even words leave her homeless, broken.[9]

Else's language is a further symptom of her alienated isolation. It is impossible for her to share anything with fellow human beings. All she is left with is the mental monologues interrupted by random encounters. None of these contacts, however, change Else's attitude. Whether she is offered the chance to sleep under the roof of the Global Hotel free of charge, or she is given a cheque that is bound to bounce, other people's words have ceased to have any meaning. Aware that other people's words can be deceiving, Else is sensitive to the manipulative power of language. However, she chooses to hang onto the ghosts of her half-words, mere letters already beginning to rot, rather than attempt to engage in any dialogue.

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[9] 'Interview with Ali Smith', see Appendix.

Playing with words is a familiar technique in *Hotel World*. All characters are more or less consciously playing with language. Language manipulation is Penny's specialty. Her wordy eloquence allows her to lie to the people she meets, to her fictional readers (and to the actual readers), to Else and, ultimately, to herself. Penny can justify her own argument that poor people are spoilt by handling money through the wordy argument that 'it was no accident that the words poor and pure were so similar' (p.178). The point of the argument is that Penny attempts to justify her mean act of feigned generosity to herself. Her lies are not directed to anybody but herself.

Throughout *Hotel World* a foregrounding of language suggests that Smith intends that readers should be alert to the variable nature of interpretation in the stories. Most of the clues are given through the puns that cluster the narratives and create cross-references and establish links between episodes, characters and issues in *Hotel World*. In 'Future Conditional' Lise's language and ability to communicate has abandoned her. Just as time has ceased to have clear meaning, words have become 'ghosts', vaguely haunting her blurred mind. Words belong to the realm of memory, the liminal space between past and present. Consequently, words are not strongholds of meaning, but rapidly fall into an unknown, undefined compartment of Lise's mind: 'Shelfily. Was that a real word? She couldn't remember. She couldn't be sure. She blinked. Black came over her eyes with her eyelids, and lifted off again' (p. 83). The voids in Lise's memory epitomise her identity crisis: as in Sara's narrative, the inability to express herself equals non-existence. The existential quality of Lise's breakdown is epitomised by the inability to find words to describe herself. When she attempts to give a definition of herself, Lise leaves a significant void: 'I am a ( ) person' (p. 85). For Lise, language has been undermined, fragmented, destroyed. Yet, it reinforces its power to reproduce itself from the 'dead cells' of the past. It is symptomatic that Deirdre, Lise's mother, defines her daughter's condition in terms of poetic creation: 'What is happening to you, [...] is visionary and poetic' (p. 92). Furthermore, William Dunbar's quotation 'This false world is bot transitory' (p. 92) signals that

Smith is trying to encrypt a crucial message in Lise's narrative. 'Hotel World' is a 'metaphysical pun'. Deirdre has coined the phrase in a poem that she has dedicated to the Global Hotel:

> You once worked on Reception
> In Control, my daughter dear.
> But now you find yourself checked in
> To your own Hotel Room, here.
> A room whose key's mysterious,
> Whose view is straight and serious,
> Whose purpose is imperious,
> Whose minibar is Fear (p.93).

Although Lise can 'recall nothing more than the fuzziest sense' of Deirdre's poem, (p. 93) her critical perception enables her to call her mother's pun 'metaphysical' and the lines of the poem are quoted by an external voice: 'Though if you had been there and you had asked her yourself Lise couldn't have remembered more than the odd word of it' (p. 93). The external voice in Lise's narrative reveals what lies beneath the surface of Lise's breakdown. Almost halfway through her novel, Smith warns the reader of an allegorical quality in the narrative. The Global Hotel is a metaphor for something more universal, as the author revealed in an interview after the publication of *Hotel World*:

> The 'hotel' is a gift of a metaphor for a writer, and particularly lends itself to the things I'm interested in as it's a place where people of different social class are constantly passing through. I wanted to discover the casual connections between those people and how they manifest themselves, but I didn't realise I'd end up with such a Grand Guignol connection.[10]

The hotel metaphor has allowed Smith to deal with the theme of liminality at many levels: afterlife, time and language all share the marginal dimension which Smith has created and set in the Global Hotel. The anonymity of the chain hotel, the obscure deceased chambermaid, the unnamed girl at the watch shop and other references scattered through the text are all clues to the allegorical meanings of *Hotel World*. Thus the 'real' hotel becomes a

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[10] Allan Radcliffe, 'Super Ali', *The List*, 15th-29th March 2001, p. 18.

metaphysical setting, as characters perform the allegory of the 'world'. One might question whether 'allegory' is the right word here. Smith does not provide a one-to-one layered set of symbolic meanings except in the broadest terms. The allegorical power of her novel results in the combining of, first, the sense of a general condition manifested in the forms of liminality in language, time, the relation of living and dead, and also the human complexity in individual characters, relationships and contexts her novel presents.

The metaphysical undercurrent in Smith's complex novel is endorsed by the set of short epigraphic quotations: Muriel Spark ('Remember you must die'), William Blake ('Energy is eternal delight') and Albert Camus ('The fall occurs at dawn'). These short quotations are the distillation of the longer epigraph from architect Charles Jencks's *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe* (1995) – 'the cosmos is much more dynamic than either a pre-designed world or a dead machine... each jump is a great mystery' – and Edwin Muir:

> Unfriendly, friendly universe,
> I pack your stars into my purse
> And bid you, bid you so farewell.
> That I can leave you, quite go out,
> Go out, go out beyond all doubt,
> My father says, is the miracle.

Even before the beginning of her story, which paradoxically started at the end, the epigraphs warn of the unconventional nature of the story, stretching beyond the ordinary, realistic frame of the parallel narratives. The setting, the episodes and the characters whose stories overlap, are incidental to the metaphysical frame of the novel. The ghost story is thus re-defined and becomes a fable of the real world, looked upon from the distorted angles of a spirit, an outcast, a madwoman, a liar and a bereaved girl. That death is not a definite ending is underlined by the plagiarised postscript that transforms Spark's epigraph, and inverts its semantic significance:

remember
you
must
live

remember
you
most
love

remainder
you
mist
leaf

The substitution of 'die' with 'life' and 'love' signals that Sara's spirit might survive, after all, the oblivion of death and that the linguistic crisis is partially overcome through the metamorphic power that language enacts. Smith deliberately disarranges the ontological order of things and successfully exposes the real world to criticism subversively originated from unconventional voices. Ultimately, the world is the focus of the story: its irrational mystery is laid bare in its incomprehensible beauty.

Liminality has been the focus of this study of Smith's shorter fiction and novels. The intermediate stages between life and afterlife, the sinister marriage of love and death, the ambiguities of language and time are manifestations of liminality that recur persistently in Smith's fiction. The mixture of realism and fantasy establishes links between the supernatural, the unknown dimension of magic and the palpable, daily familiarity of the 'real' world. It is not surprising that Smith shows concerns about critical efforts to pin down her creative scope to specific, narrow categories of nation, gender or genre. Any critical point of view, she says, would be relative. In her own words:

> All I know is I'm Scottish and I write. So of course there's an interconnection. I'm a lot of other things too, like brown haired and nearly forty and right handed and lapsed Catholic and gay and snub nosed and rather bad at cooking and where do you want to stop?

> what do you want to use? What's relevant? I'm not choosing. I'm suggesting that relevance is always relative.[11]

It is true that such things are all relative, but some *are* more important than others. Smith's texts move between bewilderment and epiphany, truthfulness and deceptiveness, reality and fantasy. Moving between such things seems more important to Smith than their distinctiveness. The complex structures of Smith's stories lose the reader in a labyrinth where the everyday mundane suddenly turns sinister, magic and inexplicable. These characteristics give to Smith's fiction originality, but her fascination with non-realistic psychological fiction also establishes a link with the Scottish fantasy tradition. As seen in the introduction to this thesis and briefly at the beginning of this chapter, Scottish fantasy is often of a psychological nature. From the ballad tradition to the modern novel, Scottish fantasy texts are projections of human minds and their metaphysical preoccupations. The surreal aura and uncanny undercurrent of Smith's stories derive, ultimately, from the merging of a psychological and philosophical investigation and the traditional, literary uncanny, as Smith exploits the expectations of realism to question its limits.

It is the postmodernist manifestations of Scottish writing, exemplified, amongst others, by Muriel Spark and Alasdair Gray that sit particularly close to the works of Smith. While Smith's fiction escapes genre definition and holds ambiguous relationships with her literary influences, the author's fascination with liminality – particularly in the coexistence of love and death – opens Smith's texts to the theoretical debate on the postmodernist relationship between text, readers and reality. The erotic tension established between author and reader through the text is a crucial tenet in Postmodernist fiction. One of the most overt strategies is the use of the pronoun 'you', to stress a close interaction with the readers.[12] According to Brian McHale, the tropes of love and death epitomise the postmodernist relationship between text, readers

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[11] 'Interview with Ali Smith', see Appendix. See also Caroline Gonda, 'Another Country? Mapping Scottish/Lesbian Writing', in *Gendering The Nation*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) pp.1-24 (pp. 4-6).

[12] See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) (London: Routledge, 1991). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

and 'reality'. In particular, McHale argues that in postmodernist writing love becomes a subversive force of metaleptic seduction. The introduction of the pronoun 'you' is one of the strategies which manifest the employment of love as a tool for metalepsis. When the person to whom the pronoun is ambiguously addressed can be both one of the characters or the reader, a text challenges the ontological boundaries between author and reader. The 'shiftiness' of the pronoun 'you' blurs any fixed boundaries between addressor and addressee, as the text becomes itself a 'liminal' area which belongs to both. In McHale's words:

> Postmodernist writing extends and deepens this aura of the uncanny, exploiting the relational potential of the second-person pronoun. The postmodernist second-person functions as an invitation to the reader to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you.* (p.224)

Smith's use of 'you' often discloses the author's will to establish a more intimate relationship between reader and narrator. This can be observed in 'God's gift', 'Small Deaths' and especially *Hotel World*, where an unknown interlocutor is ambiguously addressed at the end of the first chapter: 'I am hanging falling breaking this word and the next. Time me, would you? You. Yes, you. It's you I'm talking to' (p.31). Placed at the end of the first chapter, it is not clear whether these warnings are addressed to the reader, whether they are Sara Wilby's words or whether they belong to the author. Although Smith deliberately leaves these questions open to the reader, perhaps suggesting that there are no safe answers, the questions *do* establish a relationship with the readers, inviting them to overcome the conventional textual boundaries between author and readers. The absence of an interlocutor in Sara's monologue in the first chapter raises questions about the addressee of the warning. Since there is no stated recipient of Sara's words in the text, those words inevitably revert to the readers. Furthermore, the emphatic repetition of the pronoun 'you' stresses the intimate relationship Smith / Sara's ghost is trying to establish with the unknown addressee of her monologue. If we accept that those words are Sara's, then the boundaries between the 'seen' and the 'unseen' worlds have been overcome,

from her afterlife, the ghost has managed to tell the living people her own version of the story. However, if we prefer to believe that those words belong to Smith, another set of boundaries, the textual barriers that separate author and reader have been skilfully and subtly lowered. In this way, the reader is subtly invited to experience the text through a much more 'personal', intimate approach.

As love triggers the overcoming of textual boundaries, death represents the fall of all ontological boundaries in the representation of 'reality' in postmodernist fiction. In McHale's words: 'Postmodernist writing models or simulates death; it produces simulacra of death through confrontations between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or through vacillations between different kinds and degrees of "reality"' (p.232). One of the implications of the Postmodernist fascination with death is that even the ultimate set of boundaries, those between the 'seen' and the 'unseen', can be defied in the representation of 'reality'. This certainly happens throughout Smith's fiction, which constantly stretches between the seen and the unseen, and often erases the threshold between the living and dead. In stories like 'God's gift', 'Small deaths', 'Scary' and manifestly in *Hotel World*, the liminality of death poses metaphysical questions as it leaves characters in the unknown limbo between life and afterlife. The potential death of a fledgling or the 'small massacre' of bugs are both catalysts for the characters' reflections upon their own lives ('God's gift' and 'Small deaths'); a relationship between two adults is ambiguously based on the fragile legacy left behind by the premature death of actor River Phoenix ('Scary'); the ghost of a dead hotel maid recounts her story after her death (*Hotel World*). In all her stories, Smith seems to suggest that death is never a confined episode, but opens up new possibilities to the inexplicable sides of life, while it challenges the boundaries between life and death, physical and metaphysical dimensions, 'reality' and fantasy.

Likewise, language categories are questioned throughout her fiction. Communication is often dysfunctional. Not only does language seem to have lost its clarity, directedness and power but also words have *literally* gone

missing in the paratext of her last novel. Smith's dissemination of blank spaces in *Hotel World* reflectively enhances the gaps in the characters' minds and their unsuccessful attempts to overcome the barriers of communication. Likewise, the frequent use of wordplay and puns undermines the semantic openness and a Derridean flexible bond of signifiers and signified. However, if her playful experiments stress the dangerous ambiguity of language, at the same time, they emphasise its richness and endless potential. Words can be deceptive. The world is also deceptive. The truth can fail and lies can be truthful. These paradoxes are Smith's starting points and reveal the complexity behind her use of language, as in 'The world with love', 'Instructions for pictures of heaven' and the two novels. Rather than being defeated by the inherent ambivalence of language, Smith chooses to explore its polyvalence and demonstrate its creative potential.

Chapter Six

Re-Discovering the Scottish Doppelgänger: Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister*, *Two Women of London* and *Wild Nights*

A scant
religion drives us to our vague tremens.
we drag it at our heels, as iron chains.
a winsome boyhood among glens and bens
casts, later, double images and shades.
and ceilidhs in the cities are the lens
through which we see ourselves, unmade, remade,
by music and by grief.

(Iain Crichton Smith, from 'Lewis 1928-45')

Re-Discovering the Scottish Doppelgänger: Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister*, *Two Women of London* and *Wild Nights*

Although Emma Tennant's Scottish novels represent only a limited part of her prolific literary work, her distinctive interest in Scotland and Scottishness invites a deeper analysis of the author's relationship with her Scottish roots. The daughter of the second Baron Glenconner and Elizabeth Lady Glenconner, Tennant was born in London and educated in a public school. Despite her English upbringing, the extensive time spent in the family castle in the Scottish Borders during her childhood were still visible, years later, in the vivid Scottish imagery, inspired by the Scottish landscape, of *Wild Nights* (1979). Tennant 'grew up in his [James Hogg's] part of the country'- she has pointed out in an interview with Olga Kenyon – and 'his "most enchanted wood" was opposite my bedroom window. Where people were turned into threelegged stools and fairy rings'.[1] Significantly, the Borders have provided Tennant's writing with elements of Scottish folk and literary tradition of the supernatural, and her fascination with the writings of Stevenson and Hogg is closely related to the author's personal experience of Scotland, and the juxtaposition of the time spent in Scotland – often idealised as an idyllic time – and the traumatic move to London – a descent into a hellish pit, where the beauty and harmony left in the other world seemed to have no counterpart.[2] Emotional as her feelings of Scottish national identity might be, Tennant's fictional work is free from romanticised nostalgia, as her interest in Hogg and Stevenson suggests a deeper understanding and fascination with specific aspects of Scottish culture, namely its cultural division and sectarianism. 'Borders and boundaries are frequent motifs in her writing, – Flora Alexander has emphasised – 'and she is consistently interested in differences between Scotland and England, and the ways in which Scottish

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[1] Olga Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989), p. 184.
[2] See John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 283.

people have their own ways of thought and expression'.[3] The North / South, Scotland / England polarities constitute the skeleton of the most autobiographical of her Scottish novel, *Wild Nights*, while the concept of division and the theme of the double are at the core of the author's two other Scottish works – *The Bad Sister* (1978) and *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989) – hypertextual transpositions based respectively on James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of A Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). It is not a coincidence that two of Tennant's three Scottish novels bear a significant relationship with the tradition of the double, in her opinion, a fundamental element in the history and culture of the Scottish nation. In her words:

> The whole subject of the double came into Britain via Scotland and German metaphysics, Hoffman and others. It didn't take in England, the idea of the doppelgänger. The reason was that then England was solid and Scotland was split – between two languages, split between being Scottish and being English.[4]

The choice to link her work to a distinctive Scottish literary tradition discloses her personal attachment to her Scottish background. The notion of being simultaneously English and Scottish is felt as a crucial dilemma – 'I think it's Scottish to be split, to talk in one way and have to go South to make your living' – a parody of Edwin Muir's statement – 'Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another'.[5] Muir's theories about the Scottish schizoid nation reflected a motif running through Scottish historical thinking and literature and persisted throughout the century. Undoubtedly, Tennant's writing is concerned with theories about Scottish division, but her fiction, it will be argued, departs from Muir's binary dichotomy towards a post-structuralist, feminist theory of division. With her rewriting of *Jekyll and Hyde* and the *Justified Sinner* Tennant opens

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[3] Flora Alexander, 'Contemporary Fiction III: The Anglo-Scots', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 630-640 (p. 631).

[4] Kenyon, pp. 184-185.

[5] Kenyon, p. 185; Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1936), p. 21.

their dualities to further possibilities, through the creation of new sets of ambiguities, stemming from the author's concerns with feminist issues of gender, in the context of postmodernist rewriting. Behind *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* is the author's wilful intention to create female versions of the double, based on the Scottish traditional male stories.[6] In all its variations and nuances, postmodernist rewriting is a way of re-interpreting the existing tradition.[7] Various forms of transtextuality, including hypertextuality, have become common practice particularly amongst feminist writers, who have moulded the canon to fit their agendas.[8] Although Tennant has elsewhere attempted the rewriting of other existing works,[9] significantly, *The Bad Sister and Two Women of London* represent her *only* tribute to the Scottish literary tradition. The focus on gender is critical when rewriting two male narratives into female texts, shifting the perspective of the plots from an all-male point of view to an all-female one.[10] The critique of the patriarchal rules imposed on women, the objectification of beauty, the impact of media, women's marginalisation are all interwoven topics in the two novels. The gender switch becomes crucial to the re-interpretation of both stories, as both reveal strong elements of feminist critique of the extreme effects of a patriarchal society on women: 'The predominant focus in both of these novels is on the fragmentation of the female individual which results from pressures placed on women by patriarchal culture'.[11] Marginalisation, outer and inner division, focus on the outcast: these are the principal manifestations of the gender issue in *The Bad Sister* and *Two*

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[6] See Haffenden, p. 292.

[7] For an extensive discussion on the postmodernist and feminist use of parody and rewriting, see also Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1989); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987); Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) and *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990); Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[8] See introduction to this thesis.

[9] Other rewritings by Emma Tennant include the Faust saga in *Faustine* (1992), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of The D'Urbervilles* in *Tess* (1993) and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in *Pemberley* (1993).

[10] See Connor 1998. See also Carol Anderson, 'Listening to the Women Talk', in *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, ed. by Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: University Press, 1993), pp. 170-86.

[11] Alexander 'Contemporary Fiction III', p. 631.

Women of London, which enhance the Scottish character of the two novels. As Carol Anderson summarises:

> The experience of exclusion and marginalisation and the sense of being a divided self, are strongly present in some Scottish writing. If male Scottish authors have had to contend with difficulties generated in part by a problematic relationship to national identity, language and literary tradition, for Scottish women this experience is compounded by gender.[12]

The focus on engendered ideas of fragmentation and division reinforces the link with the Scottish tradition. The rewritings merge personal and literary tributes to the Scottish tradition, the fascination with the theme of the double, and the feminist commitment to gender issues.

The epigraph to *The Bad Sister* taken from William Wordsworth's 'Yarrow Unvisited', exposes the consistent motif of duplication at the threshold of the main narrative:

> Let beeves and home-bred kine partake
> The sweets of Burn-mill meadow;
> The swan on still St Mary's Lake
> Float double, swan and shadow![13]

The reference to the 'double' movement of the swan and its shadow over the water surface anticipates the sinister contours of the doppelgänger theme in the story. The motif of inner division runs through *The Bad Sister* in a very similar way to Hogg's *Justified Sinner*. The novel is structured in two parts – the 'Editor's Narrative' and 'Jane's Journal' – as in the original by Hogg, where the 'Editor's Narrative' is followed by the 'Sinner's Memoirs'. As in the *Justified Sinner*, the coexistence of the two narratives constitutes the first element of bewilderment, as the Editor's apparently rational point of view becomes gradually blurred by the irrational inconsistencies of 'Jane's Journal', leaving Editor and reader equally unable to discern the solution of the plot. Hogg was

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[12] Anderson 1993, p. 171.

[13] Emma Tennant, *The Bad Sister* (1978) (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the texts.

arguably a prophet of postmodernist 'unreliable narrators' and the inconsistencies of both narratives in Hogg's text and the game established with the reader – seduced into a seemingly rational narrative that proves to be full of inconsistencies – demonstrate Hogg's questioning of narrative boundaries. At the beginning of the *Justified Sinner*, the Editor's admission that he has acquired material from oral tradition to reconstruct Robert Wringhim's strange vicissitudes poses the first questions about his narrative reliability. How truthful and consistent are his sources? Tradition is, in his words, 'motley', a manifold cluster of legends and conflicting versions of the same story. The ambivalence of tradition becomes more manifest throughout his narrative and reaches its climax at the end. Despite his efforts to rationalise the uncanny elements of the story, the enlightened Editor cannot but admit defeat against the inexplicable mystery behind Wringhim's life and death. The inability to rationalise the investigated episodes and to understand Wringhim's memoirs leads to the final admission of the irrational's victory over the rational:

> With regard to the work itself, I dare not venture a judgement, for I do not understand it. I believe no person, man or woman, will ever peruse it with the same attention that I have done, and yet I confess that I do not comprehend the writer's drift. It is certainly impossible that these scenes could have ever occurred, that he describes as having himself transacted. I think it *may be* possible he had some hand in the death of his brother, and yet I am disposed greatly to doubt it.[14]

Similarly, Tennant challenges readers of *The Bad Sister* to follow two parallel narrative labyrinths. The Editor's quest to find out the truth behind the murder of Jane's father and sister Ishbel is defeated, and, at the end of the narrative, he is entrapped by his own attempt to prove Jane's liability for the two murders:

> I am now practically convinced that Jane Wilde killed Michael Dalzell and his daughter. But it seems that I will never furnish enough proof. For a time I was so taken in by Jane's jealous descriptions of Miranda as her boyfriend's past love that I felt the woman who had written this could in no way have been describing her half-sister. (p. 222)

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[14] James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 207-8. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The inability to fully comprehend the biographical material is shared in both Hogg's and Tennant's texts. These elements become even more obvious when the two Editors have made the effort to impose their rational control over the irrational mysteries contained in the memoirs. In truth, as both Editors eventually admit, there is more than one possibility and more than one version of the facts. The notion of monolithic, universal, objective truth is undermined through different, but equally plausible, interpretations suggested in the texts. As the *Justified Sinner* can be read through two interpretative lenses, so is *The Bad Sister* open to a supernatural and a psychological interpretation from the beginning to the end. The possibility that Jane, like Robert, could be the victim of a supernatural agent is suggested repeatedly in the Editor's narrative:

> I am in no way psychic or superstitious, but the suggestion of my psychiatrist friends, that there had never been any such people as Meg or Gil-martin [...] seemed to me more than inadequate. I was forced to wonder: if Meg did indeed have these powers, had she perhaps summoned up a certain personage well-known in the Ettrick area for many hundreds of years, called Gil-martin, who, if I remember, had plagued a young man in the seventeenth century, and whose memoirs were discovered by James Hogg. (pp. 221-2)

The open reference to Hogg's text emphasises the interpretative tension recreated by Tennant's narrative. As the original hypotext, in *The Bad Sister* duality pervades structure, themes, characterisation and interpretation. The irrational power of superstition and prejudice creeps even into the twentieth-century psychiatry-alert Editor, just as it had haunted the *Justified Sinner*'s enlighted Editor, more than a century earlier. And like Hogg's readers, Tennant's critics need to follow both paths to comprehend the text in its full complexity.

The characters' psychological development reflects the structural division. In both Hogg's and Tennant's texts, the main characters' increasingly split personalities suggest a psychological interpretation of the stories, and all demons could be denied any existence outwith the characters' deranged minds. The strict Calvinist principles that haunted and deranged Wringhim's mind in Hogg's novel are translated into a sort of uncontrolled 'radical feminism' in *The*

Bad Sister. The protagonist, appropriately named Jane Wilde, suffers the severe effects of continuous brainwashing received during her upbringing in a women's commune. Her psychotic dissociation manifests itself through several symptoms significantly revealing a problematic relationship with her gender. These are exemplified in the inconsistent self-representations of her body and the ambiguous relationships established with other women characters. Brought up in a radically feminist environment, she is exposed, from an early age, to the vengeful doctrines shared by its members. The inner conflict starts to develop within Jane as two opposite forces seem to fight in her mind, generating the first paranoid nucleus in her psyche:

> She was very much in two minds about the whole thing. On the one hand, Meg and her mother had brought her up to fight capitalism, to be in a state of perpetual war with the society they lived in, and she was a radical by temperament, and on the other she wanted peace and harmony which it seems she could never find. (p. 37)

Jane's growing struggle for 'peace and harmony' is unsuccessful, although she is always in pursuit of this state of calm that seems to be forever denied to her. Instead, Meg, Tennant's personification of Hogg's Gil-martin, keeps the flame of hatred alive in Jane's impressionable mind. In the original text, the tempter manages to channel Wringhim's obsession with his own membership of the 'elect' and his mission to keep evil away from the world into hatred towards his rival brother. Similarly, Tennant has Meg channel Jane's hatred of capitalist society on the 'bad sister', the usurper of Jane's place in her father's affection and, ultimately, in the world. Meg expresses the root of the conflict in a sophisticated and esoteric formula, which, she believes, summarises the core of the world's major problems, the 'two women-in-one' or 'the suppression of masculinity in women and femininity in men' (p. 40). The idea of woman's impossible search for the male Muse – traditionally a female creature – inspired by the reading of Virginia Woolf, creates the fundamental basis for the schizophrenic development of the character.[15] Triggered by the unsolvable

[15] See Anderson 1993, p. 178; Haffenden p. 289.

relationship between woman and woman, the conflict within Jane's psyche grows throughout the narrative. Unable to solve the issues between herself and her sister, Jane inevitably develops a split personality. Jane's paranoia is perhaps more complex than Wringhim's derangement, in that Tennant multiplies the levels of division through the complex relationship with the female gender expressed as an endless struggle against patriarchal institutions. Jane's rejection of her partner Tony, her choice against procreation and her determination to wear a genderless uniform of denim jacket and trousers are all expressions of her desire to be invisible and delete any traces of her femininity from her body. Likewise, her dismissal of traditional customs such as the Sunday lunch signals her unyielding attitude towards established patriarchal traditions meant to glue couples together, while re-emphasising conventional gender roles and enclosing women within the four walls of their kitchens. Imagery often conveys Jane's feelings of entrapment and the ambiguity behind the apparent security of the patriarchal myths of happiness and coupledom: cardboard women are 'trapped' in the supermarkets after closing time, 'alter-egos' of the 'real' women, 'who will go and become enclosed there' in the morning.[16]

Representations of Jane's body are also symptomatic of her struggle to reach unity and her inability to achieve it. A further clue to Jane's paranoid attitude to her female self is suggested by an ambiguous relationship with her own body. Permanently at war with her femininity, Jane's body is often – and increasingly throughout the plot – perceived in a fragmented, inconsistent way. Choosing to change her appearance, she first dies her hair blonde, to resemble her half sister, and then cuts it short, to get rid of one of her feminine attributes. Physical metamorphosis, in itself a symbolic representation of mental instability, becomes increasingly out of Jane's control. Her body is subject to changes apparently independent from her will. Perceptions of her body shift continuously, as her figure appears to grow fat and shrink uncontrollably. At the

[16] For a discussion of Tennant's use of the feminist approach to consumerism see also Anderson 1993, p. 178.

beginning, she has a faint memory of being thin and vulnerable, then she grows fat and later, towards the end of her memoir, her body seemingly shrinks again. Physical changes are symptomatic manifestations of her divided self, unable to recuperate unity and her endlessly growing and shrinking are manifestations of her constant desire to be transformed and the obsessive wish to be something other than herself:

> Women and mirrors; mirrors and women. My face seemed to have grown much smaller and my eyes were round and rimmed with exhaustion, black as the underside of a moth. My hair stood in tufts all over my head. I would have smiled but my mouth, which looked thinner, was clamped together. I wondered if my teeth were different underneath. (p. 52)

Jane's perceptions of her enigmatically polymorphic body – like Cixous and Clément's 'newly born woman' – disclose a mixture of fear for the unknown and, simultaneously, a great desire to embrace the unexpected, to find the missing part, to close the gap in her female body that aches and makes her feel lonely and incomplete. Tennant plays with gender roles and identities to recreate the split personality of Robert Wringhim, who had also shown a reproachful attitude towards women and sexuality in general. Similarly, Jane rejects her body and a conventional relationship with her partner, while the desire increases to go beyond social constrictions forced upon her gender. The longing for an androgynous body is the logical consequence to Jane's rejection of her female gender, seen merely as an alien part of a divided entity, albeit desperate to find the harmony of the whole:

> In my perfect androgyny, my face round as a mermaid's, my mouth black and slit like a wound from a knife, my legs like a stevedore's that tells how long I have been under the sea, hair growing upward, sucked by the bubbles, waving like weed in the cold green current-like a treasure long lost at sea, embedded in nacreous green rock, shifted here and there on the sandy floor by shoals of spotted fish, I am for them the dread of their seafaring days: the siren with a cracked voice who lures them to the bottom of the sea, the forgotten woman and half-man who make up the Angel of Death. (pp. 58-9)

The powerful image of an androgynous, half-animal / half-human mermaid embodies Jane's dream of revenge. In her hallucinatory state, Jane transforms herself into an alluring and bewitching creature but also, paradoxically, an 'angel of death': the vengeful fantasies become more clearly associated with Jane's physical changes and her camouflaging transformations, almost a premonition of her murder committed at a fancy dress party. Ironically, at her death, Jane's corpse finally acquires the androgyny longed for throughout her troubled existence: 'there was something hermaphroditic about it' (p. 220). The episode of the exhumed corpse has parallels with Hogg's disagreeing descriptions of Wringhim's corpse in three different versions of the burial. In Hogg's fictional letter to *Blackwood's Magazine*, the first version of the oral tradition held that the body had been buried at Cowan's-Croft with all 'that he had on and about him, silver knife and fork and altogether' (p.199);[17] the letter, however, recalls another episode, when two youths exhumed the yellow-haired body to find his clothes in perfect condition, including 'a broad blue bonnet' (p. 200), but no trace of his knife or fork; according to the Editor's personal experience and information, the corpse was buried at Faw-Law – and not at Cowan's-Croft – because the sun was already up and a suicide death should traditionally be buried in the dark. Moreover, in the attempt to rush the burial, according to one of the men who witnessed the event, the corpse's nose and skull were crushed under the iron heel of one of the undertakers. Once exhumed, however, the corpse did not look anything like the previous descriptions: his hair 'is neither black nor fair, but of a darkish dusk'; he wore 'no broad nor Border bonnet' but probably a 'Highland bonnet' (p. 204) and his skull had been damaged by a spade (and not a heel) in his temples (and not in his nose). Hogg plays with the multiple possibilities offered by oral tradition, highlighting the plethora of variations accounted for by legends, rumours and local gossip. Having deliberately deconstructed the credibility of his own narrative, he poses questions of interpretation before his readers, teasing its

[17] For a critical analysis of the three burials, see also M. York Mason, 'The Three Burials in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 13 (1978), 15-23.

own narratives towards different directions. Likewise, Tennant uses the same techniques and gives inconsistent details both in the 'Editor's Narrative' and in 'Jane's Journal', to baffle the readers and deconstruct the objectiveness of the story. Descriptions of Jane are inconsistent not only in her memoirs, but also in the Editor's Narrative. Here is, for example, the Editor's comparative evaluation of the suspect's identikit pictures and Jane's photographs:

> I stared at the identikit pictures, all ridiculously dissimilar to each other, of the girl seen by passers-by in Hampstead, and the girl seen in the street where Dalzell's daughter was found. There were photographs of Jane in existence, of course, but it was hard to gauge anything about her from them. Her hair was blonde, but it looked as if it was probably tinted. Her face was curiously blank. (p. 29)

Inconsistency pervades also Jane's ambiguous relationships towards other women. A mixture of attraction and repulsion always haunts Jane's feelings towards the unknown, anonymous fleet of outcast women (the 'battered and the dykes') encountered every day on her wanderings. Moreover, torn between the opposed tensions within her self, Jane gradually concentrates her inner struggle on the obsessive love-hate relationship with the three main female characters: Ishbel / Miranda, Meg, and Mrs Marten.

Although in the Editor's narrative there are hints of Jane's involvement in the murder of her half-sister Ishbel, Tennant does not disclose any further details as regards the relationship between the two half siblings until the start of 'Jane's Journal'. Here, the reader is made aware of the growing obsession suffered by Jane from an early age, showing the symptoms of extreme jealousy later developed into paranoid behaviour. In the visionary flashbacks of crucial episodes and memories from her childhood, the ambiguous nature of the feelings between Jane and Ishbel surfaces in the memoirs: 'I was completely and obsessively jealous of her. I was her shadow and she mine' (p. 74). Forced to be apart from her sister and an unacknowledged daughter of her father, Jane develops a hatred nourished by her feelings of rejection and the brainwashing by the commune women. Jane's memories and feelings for Ishbel appear confused with her fantasies, in which she either imagines to murder or

fantasises about a morbid attachment with her, while Ishbel's identity is confused with that of Marie – the servant girl Jane sleeps with – and Miranda, a friend of Tony's. Jane's paranoid fear and desire to get rid of Ishbel is symptomatically expressed by her desperate search for a woman whose name she knows starts with the letter 'M': 'M... why should she be in under her first name anyway? But I have a feeling she is. M for mother, for murder, for Meg. M for her. She made me a shadow, discarded by Tony before he had even met me. I am in Meg now, for Meg has my blood, and soon M, you will be' (p. 149). This intriguing passage conceals several important details about the relationship between Jane and the other main women characters, Meg and Mrs Marten. The obsession for a mysterious person whose name starts with 'M', indicates the coexistence of the supernatural and psychological interpretative keys in Jane's story. Jane's awareness that 'M' is the ominous thirteenth letter in the alphabet indicates how superstition is blurring her perceptions. 'M', however, is also the initial of 'mother', and of both of Jane's parents (Mary and Michael). It is clear that the connection between all the names starting with 'M' can also rely on a psychological, rather than a supernatural, foundation. 'M' seems the key to the mystery behind *The Bad Sister* and the sinister bonds that tie Jane to Meg and Mrs Marten. As in the original by Hogg, the existence of Meg outside Jane's mind is never proved. Furthermore, the ritual through which Meg apparently initiates Jane to the worship of her own brother's Gil-martin is another open reference to Hogg's devil. Though her name often recurs in Jane's diary, Tennant insinuates doubts about Meg's existence, following Hogg's steps in the undermining of Gil-martin's existence in the *Justified Sinner.* Meg's existence might, in fact, be denied, just as the original Gil-martin's existence could be the product of Wringhim's schizophrenia. Meg is to Jane what Gil-martin is to Wringhim who, in a moment of lucidity, fears he is the victim of a bewitching spell:

> I knew, myself, that I was bewitched, and suspected my father's reputed concubine of the deed.[...] I generally conceived myself to be two people. When I lay in bed, I deemed there were two of us in it; [...] The most perverse part of it was, that I rarely conceived *myself* to

> be any of the two persons. I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other (pp. 125-126).

As in the *Justified Sinner*, in *The Bad Sister* nobody is able to give a clear description of the devilish creature, nor is Meg's existence proved outside the protagonist's deranged mind. Like Hogg's Gil-martin, Meg is a chameleon, easily confused with other characters, to the point that Stephen, a friend of Jane's, admits to the Editor that 'it all depends on what you believe' (p. 38) and that 'Meg was a kind of embezzlement [...] an enravishment' (p. 44). The possibility that Meg does not exist outside Jane's paranoia could be a solution to the mystery of Meg's identity. Beside anything else, nobody gives a consistent description or sees her, other than Jane. Tennant, like Hogg, leaves open the possibility of a psychological interpretation of the story, suggested by the various inconsistent descriptions of Meg and Jane's increasing mental derangement. Like Gil-martin, Meg could be nothing but an imaginary creation of Jane's psychotic mind.

The narrative, however, remains tense until the very end, when one last clue twists it towards a supernatural interpretation. On his visit to Jane's partner's mother, Mrs Marten, the Editor remarks a singular coincidence that leaves him baffled and unable either to understand or solve the murder of Jane's sister:

> Perhaps by then I was becoming superstitious and irrational myself. But as I turned to leave, she came with me to the gate and waved goodbye. She was wearing a small white petal hat, and as it was windy outside, the petals ruffled in the breeze. I don't know why, but I couldn't help remembering Stephen's description of his visit to Meg, and the white petals blowing in from the window onto her hair.
> (p. 223)

It is therefore possible and plausible that not only Meg exists, but that she is Mrs Marten. This interpretation is underpinned by further textual evidence. Firstly, the assonance of 'Marten' with 'Gil Martin', allegedly Meg's brother, is a clear suggestion of identification. Secondly, Mrs Marten's witchy looks and her strange relationship with Jane suggest the sinister hypothesis that Mrs Marten is the *real* demon haunting Jane's existence. At the end of her memoirs, is an

unexpected, ambiguous *anagnoresis*: 'I glanced from one woman to the other. Mrs Marten was preening herself in a compact mirror now, and Meg — or a slice of Meg — was reflected alongside her. Why did they seem suddenly so alike — I could hardly tell the difference' (p. 188). Though this could lead to proving the identification of Meg as Mrs Marten, therefore admitting the devil's existence and supporting a supernatural, rather than a psychological, interpretation, Tennant insinuates doubts immediately after the revelation: 'Or did I see resemblances everywhere, now that my own double was so near her end? I stared fascinated at the twin reflections' (p. 188).

Parallel to a psychological interpretation of Jane's Memoirs as a schizoid narrative is the possibility, persistently suggested, of a supernatural interpretation of the story, as Jane's life is preceded by a plethora of sinister omens from the moment of her conception. Following the superstition mentioned in Hogg's narrative, the third child in a line of adultery is supposed to have bonds with the devil. As we read in Hogg: 'The young spark was the third in a direct line who had all been children of adultery; and it was well-known that all such were born half deils [sic] themselves, and nothing was more likely that they should hold intercourse with their fellows' (p. 38). Like Wringhim, Jane is held to have devilish connections and therefore, like Hogg's wretched character, destined to live the outcast's life. She is rejected by her father who does not acknowledge her as his rightful heiress since she is the result of his adulterous relationship with a young woman. Her 'name was Mary, her mother was unmarried and Irish, and she was six months pregnant with Michael's child' (p. 14). Jane's birth is preceded by a series of superstitious allusions to 'doubles' during a night out described in the Editor's narrative. Whilst gambling in London before his wedding, Lord Dalzell, Jane's father, loses a great sum of money because the backgammon dice keep showing only twos; his gambling mates nickname him 'Deuce Dalzell' and warn him: 'You'll be seeing double at the wedding, old boy!' (p. 13); finally, when at home, he perceives a sinister shadow which he then recognises as Jane's mother's, Mary. Born out of wedlock, Jane carries a sinister stigma from the moment of her conception.

Prejudice haunts her from the beginning, when Jane's sinister links with the devil are established through the references to Hogg's text. As in Hogg's work the tension remains and the interpretation is kept open until the end.

Jane's psychological fragmentation has been emphasised by her taking on the camouflage of different shapes and the perpetual metamorphoses her body goes through. The rejection of her female biological and social role is the physical manifestation of her fragmented self. Unable to find unity within herself, Jane's struggle drowns itself in a myriad of schizoid identities. Her increasing state of paranoia affects her relationships with other women and allows her to see only evil creatures whose contours become more sinister as the narrative develops. However real the demons can appear, there is a strong psychological component in Jane's troubled existence, as emphasised by Alexander: 'Jane's quest for wholeness is presented in terms that recall, in Kristevan terms, the desire to return to the semiotic state, undivided from the mother, while at the same time an element of destructiveness in their relationship is signalled by a suggestion of vampirism'.[18] Tennant pushes the process of duplication to its extreme limit. Jane's ultimate awareness of being her own double represents the final stage of her mental collapse and contributes to the general feeling of displacement and estrangement the reader has shared with the divided character: 'I'm the double, now it's me who's become the shadow. Where I was haunted, now I will pursue. And the world will try to stamp me out, as I run like a grey replica of my vanished self-evil, unwanted, voracious in my needs' (p. 148). Throughout the novel, the main character's confused psychological state of self-loss and fragmentation has been accompanied by the sinister suspicion that a supernatural agent is at work. The psychiatric reports reviewed by the Editor to try and rationalise the events are not sufficient, even to the Editor himself, to dismiss the possibility of Meg's existence and of her magical power over Jane's crimes. Following her model, Tennant plays with the two possibilities recreating the tension at the core of Hogg's masterpiece and keeping it high from the beginning until the end of her narrative. Both a

[18] Alexander 'Contemporary Fiction III', p. 632.

supernatural and a psychological interpretation could 'justify' Jane's and her 'sins'. Her mysterious death does not rule out either possibility, but leaves Editor and readers in doubt.

A critique of the patriarchal order, social pressure and the employment of the supernatural are also critical components of *Two Women of London*, a more complex work which, starting from Stevenson's doppelgänger, articulates an engendered story of human duplication. The theme of division is facilitated through narrative structure, style, imagery and characterisation. Stevenson's text is remoulded, just like Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, to accommodate Tennant's gender agenda.

Tennant's employment of different points of view creates a complex narrative and leaves space for various possible interpretations. Even more than in *The Bad Sister*, *Two Women of London* is fragmented to the point of resembling a mosaic of uneven, different, superimposed sources. The narrative's framework is provided by an anonymous narrator researching the mystery behind the identity of Mrs Hyde and the relationship between her and Ms Jekyll. The central narrative, however, embodies several other voices, which help the narrator to reach the final solution to the riddle, ultimately revealed in an ansaphone message by Eliza Jekyll before her disappearance. The use of different narratives and points of view is a technique borrowed from the original *Jekyll*. Stevenson interweaves the mystery of his story through the use of multiple narrators: Utterson's main point of view is supported by 'Dr Lanyon's narrative' and, at the end, by 'Henry Jekyll's full statement of the case'. Without these external sources, Utterson would probably have been unable to understand the mystery and solve the Jekyll / Hyde equation. Moreover, in addition to the written sources, other people's points of view are adopted to reconstruct the story. In particular, Poole and the maid who is an eyewitness to the Carew murder, play an important role towards the solution of the riddle. Stevenson willingly undermines his witnesses' reliability, casting doubts upon the credibility of their statements: the maid is of a 'romantic disposition', prone

to imagine things and, perhaps, distort reality; likewise, Poole, Jekyll's faithful butler, does not seem to be always in control of his nerves: towards the end, when he and Utterson are about to break into Jekyll's lab, Poole does not recognise his own master's voice, and speaks to Jekyll's maid 'with a ferocity of accent that testified to his own jangled nerves'.[19]

In a similar way, Tennant introduces a number of different characters, each one voicing or expressing their partial knowledge and different versions of the facts, as underlined by the headings of the main sections: 'Mara's video and film', 'Jean Hastie's journal', 'Two letters', 'Dr Frances Crane's Notes and Memorabilia', 'Editor's Postscript' and 'An afterword by Jean Hastie'. In addition to the copious main sources, other points of view constitute sub-sources and become relevant for the witnessing of crucial events, such as the murder of Jeremy Toller witnessed by Robina's niece, Tilda.

Whether or not directly involved in Eliza Jekyll's tragic story, all characters prove unreliable or, at least, strongly biased: Mara is an artist and her portrayals of Mrs Hyde are a strongly subjective expression of her own creative mind, rather than an unbiased documentary representation; Jean Hastie, Eliza Jekyll's closest friend, naturally biased towards her friend, ignores the fact that Eliza had been married, while she herself is ambiguously attracted to her horrible double, Mrs Hyde; Tilda, the alleged witness of the murder, is known to see ghosts and is 'gullible'. From the beginning of the novel, the narrative fragmentation into different voices is emphasised through the characters' theatrical introduction under the collective 'CAST'. This is a device adopted by the Editor in order to rationalise the story and help the reader to follow the maze of episodes and opinions. Characters become actors, the role-players of a play managed by a sinisterly unknown director. At the same time, the characters' introduction invites the creation of preconceptions. Readers are inevitably biased towards each of the characters involved in the story, before beginning the book. Prejudice, the core of the dynamics between Mrs Hyde and

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[19] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1889), *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*, ed. by Jenni Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 70. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

her neighbours, is introduced as the force governing events from the start. Readers are involved in the process of interpretation that all the characters take part in, the interactive game of preconceptions established by the Editor.

As already seen in Stevenson, the coexistence of different narrative sources – letters, memorabilia, personal statements – in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* includes different genres of written material. Tennant takes the employment of different sources further, exploiting the numerous formats available in a media-oriented society. *Two Women of London* is narrated mainly through the recorded impressions of the characters' spoken and written words. In addition to these, visual devices record many of the events: intrusive lenses often watch characters, and, from the beginning of the narrative, media is an imposingly voyeuristic presence. The first murder scene triggers the flash-back narrative:

> All day excitement will spread. From the police themselves, who have spent so long trying to track this man down. From the press, who will interview past victims; from TV which takes the victims and sits them blindfold in the studio to make them talk of rape and violence [...] Nobody knew his face; and yet, as the police vans arrive and the TV cameras beam their hot, white light in the February darkness, those who run out and catch a glimpse of him as he lies there on the path seem to feel they have lived closely with him for years.[20]

Ironically, the media and the authorities have caught a red herring, as the victim of Mrs Hyde's murder is not the rapist who has been frightening the well-off Crescents of West London, but the late Jeremy Toller – Eliza Jekyll's former husband – killed by Mrs Hyde in an extreme deed for revenge. The media's exploitation of the fear-generated collective hysteria is ruthless to all the victims and reinvents the 'truth' merely to sell a product. TV cameras, photography and photomontage are omnipresent in a society where the power of visual images affects people's ability to understand. The multiple reflections of this world question the individual's ability to maintain an autonomous existence. After her mental breakdown, Eliza suddenly loses her job in an art gallery. Her career demonstrates the precarious nature of the image world, where women are

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[20] Emma Tennant, *Two Women of London* (1989), *The Bad Sister: An Emma Tennant Omnibus* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), pp. 174-5. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

suddenly catapulted 'from rags to riches' and vice versa. Inevitably influenced by the bombarding pictures presented to characters and readers, both are baffled by the confusing cluster of inconsistent, though strong, imagery. Whatever the medium, the lens creates an effect of distortion. Such artificial images, we will see, further the effect of narrative fragmentation.

The division into several subsections and the use of different mediums highlighting the multiple narrative levels, exemplify the divisions at the core of Tennant's novel. The coexistence of a double setting, London and Scotland, constitutes a further element of fragmentation in the narrative. In the original text, Stevenson portrays London through a sinister light that well suits the subject of his novel. There are several references to 'the fogs of London' which help create an atmosphere of discomfort and uncertainty. In this environment perceptions are equally polluted and characters can be deceived by their misled senses. The creation of a setting is crucial to the atmosphere in Tennant's text. Tennant portrays a disjointed London, highlighting its contrasts and making the capital of England resemble the capital of Scotland: 'like Stevenson, she uses a London background that suggests Edinburgh'.[21] Like Edinburgh, London is sectarian, with opposing factions, and unwanted enemies lurking round the corner. The reaction to the rapist's threat and the consequent 'wrong' murder suggests the general attitude towards what is alien, unknown, and therefore dangerous for the group. Similarly, Mrs Hyde, just like the rapist, constitutes a living threat to the community. With her bizarre looks and unconventional behaviour, she threatens the community's fragile balance and its already cracked integrity. Tennant's London is even more frightening than Stevenson's, as the boundaries of the twentieth century capital are more open to threatening, alien intrusions. The alluring cosmopolitan metropolis attracts people from all backgrounds (Mara Kaletsky is an international artist; Robina Sandel's family are Jewish; Tilda, her niece, has come from Austria to learn English; Eliza Jekyll comes from Scotland). Behind the façade of an equal opportunities

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[21]Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition', in *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992) pp. 45-59 (p. 51).

Mecca, London exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalist society, happy to dispose of people when they are of no more use to the quick-changing needs of consumerism. As the Editor admits: 'We are surrounded daily by evidence of violence, poverty and misery in this city. The media leave us in no doubt that rapaciousness and a 'loadsomoney' [sic] economy have come to represent the highest value in the land' (p. 177). Stage to the daily unfairness of a consumerist society, London is the appropriate setting for the sinister deeds performed by Mrs Hyde, the ultimate rejection of the capital of objectified beauty. Behind the façade of respectability, even the best neighbourhood shelters Mrs Hyde in its back-gardens. A question remains unanswered at the end of the story: is Mrs Hyde a victim of or a threat to the society she lives in? The tense ambiguities established from the beginning by the multiple points of view, the fragmentation of the narrative and its divided settings, run throughout the novel, focusing on the unutterable, inexplicable, unwanted Mrs Hyde. The main character and the relationship between her and the other characters of the story are the key to the solution of the mysterious murder and the secret behind Mrs Hyde's existence. From the beginning, Tennant's portrayal of Mrs Hyde is more frightening than Stevenson's Mr Hyde. Throughout the novella, Stevenson builds a thick curtain of mystery around Mr Hyde's existence. Only at the very end, in Jekyll's own confession, are the readers informed that Mr Hyde had his own abode in Soho. Until Jekyll's self-disclosure, readers and characters are left equally ignorant about Mr Hyde's whereabouts and permanent residence. The uncertainty around Mr Hyde's living arrangements is accompanied by a lack of knowledge about any of the crimes allegedly committed by him. Stevenson creates a network of unreliable witnesses who, in different ways, are clearly fooled by Jekyll's magic metamorphosis. Unlike Mr Hyde's mysterious existence, one of the most crucial differences between Stevenson's and Tennant's texts is Mrs Hyde's established role in the community. Neighbours, who barely tolerate her presence in the neighbourhood and the appalling living conditions she shares with her children, grudgingly acknowledge her existence. While Mr Hyde's existence is veiled with mystery until the end of the novella,

Mrs Hyde, far from being hidden, is the powerful epicentre ready to disrupt the community. Tennant's feminisation of Stevenson's story contributes to its increasingly subversive narrative. Dr Jekyll is single and does not have any children. Consequently, his freedom through the persona of Mr Hyde is not bound by any social or moral duties towards a potential family. On the other hand, Tennant's gender shift in *Two Women of London* adds a more disturbing detail to the story, for Eliza Jekyll used to be married and has children. Her infatuation with the dream of beauty and return to youth – made possible by drugs – means that her children need to disappear from her new existence: the only way out is to delegate their care to the hideous Mrs Hyde.

As a consequence of her undeniable presence, Mrs Hyde is more exposed to judgement than Mr Hyde ever is. While people can only make assumptions about Mr Hyde's countenance and life-style, Mrs Hyde's hideous looks and uncanny behaviour constitute one of the recurring motifs in the neighbourhood's gossip. Inevitably, perceptions about Mrs Hyde differ across the various dissonant voices of the novel. For example, on the night Mrs Hyde makes her grand entrance dressed only in a revealing water-proof coat, 'Tilda, of course saw a ghost' (p. 197); Jean Hastie perceives the Freudian uncanny 'combination of the familiar and the unknown' (p. 197);[22] Carol Hill believes that Mrs Hyde's terrible looks are caused by her difficult family situation and the impending threat of having her children taken away; Frances Crane and the camera's silence are 'equally revealing' (p. 197). Nobody knows the truth about Mrs Hyde and, despite the general aura of disapproval, her physical description is intriguingly ambiguous, as shown through Mara's artwork:

> The lens shows us a face that seems almost to have stopped being a face altogether. It's as if a once wide-boned, generous face, a beautiful face, even, to go by the edge of the high bridge of a slender nose and the curve of the jaw, has in some indescribable way been pulled sideways and downwards — so that an evil, spiteful face, a nose hooked like a witch's in the old pictures, eyes baleful and

[22] See also the discussion on Freud's definition on 'The Uncanny' in the introduction of this thesis. Freud's argument that the uncanny derives from the coexistence of the unfamiliar with the familiar is behind Tennant's representation of Mrs Hyde.

> peering in a cloud of rain that's like the rising mists of a Hell that lies always at her feet — looks back at us in Mara's version. (p. 198)

Mara's photomontage provides the most detailed and intriguing description of Mrs Hyde; beauty and physical corruption merge in 'The Face of Revenge', a collage of all the rape victims' photographs Mara has glued together to recreate Mrs Hyde's features. Mara has chosen to represent the threatening Mrs Hyde as a victim seeking revenge. Paradoxically, at the end of the story Mrs Hyde is the attacker, who kills an apparently innocent man. Mara's visual artwork embodies the inconsistencies and ambiguities that permeate the character of Mrs Hyde: she is simultaneously attacker and victim, representing the two extremes that coexist in Tennant's novel.

This aspect is one that makes Mrs Hyde an indefinable entity, an inexplicable mystery; though her existence is never denied, her ambiguity develops Tennant's character from Stevenson's Mr Hyde. Jekyll's alter-ego is impossible to define or comprehend. Nobody is able to describe Hyde in a rational, comprehensible way. As Connor has pointed out, on more than one occasion, Hyde is in fact described in 'feminine' terms, almost to say that Jekyll's and Hyde's 'indistinct union of self and not-self' cannot but be described through a gender translation.[23] Tennant carries the ambiguity concealed in Stevenson's novella into all characters of *Two Women of London*, none of which holds a clearly defined identity. In fact, all characters act with different degrees of incoherence. Eliza Jekyll's manner is 'rather artificial' (p. 184), while her 'impossibly perfect' (p. 245) physical appearance contrasts with her alter ego's description 'as alarming and repellent in appearance as a ghost' (p. 204). Just like her alter ego, however, Eliza Jekyll does not escape judgement from neighbours and acquaintances that are aware of her uncanny looks and secretive existence. Similarly, inconsistency governs other characters' perceptions. Just before her death, Dr Crane declares that she is 'in two minds about the possibility of the whole thing' (p. 176), while Jean Hastie admits being 'doubly cautious, as a Scot' (p. 203) and is utterly horrified when Grace Poole

[23] Connor 1998, p. 180.

suggests a possible family relation between Mrs Hyde and Jean Hastie (p. 221). The idea of a divided self is not confined to the split of the main character and her alter ego, but psychological fragmentation pervades the whole characterisation of *Two Women of London*. This is also emphasised by Tennant's division of Stevenson's Dr Hastie Lanyon, split into the two characters – Dr Frances Crane and Jean Hastie – who reveal the truth about Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde: in *Two Women of London*, Elphinstone argues, 'fragmentation goes further than in her original'.[24] In particular, the others' ambivalent attitude towards Mrs Hyde is exemplified by Jean Hastie's observations, which constitute a conspicuous part of the narrative. Despite her disapproval and her effort to rescue Mrs Hyde's children from their mother's neglect and evil disposition, the Editor perceives Jean Hastie's ambiguous attraction towards Mrs Hyde:

> It occurred to me, slightly uncomfortably, that evil women like Mrs Hyde have a fascination for women such as Jean Hastie: as if a whole buried side to their nature, coming alive for a moment or so at the mention of the crime or whichever wicked deed, stirs pleasurably in them before subsiding again. (p. 238)

To Jean Hastie and the other women witnessing the story, Mrs Hyde represents the most hidden facet of womanhood: she is the sinister, evil side repressed in each of them, and, nonetheless, ready to come out, as shown by Eliza Jekyll's story. The impending threat is what makes Mrs Hyde all the more dangerous and frightening to the other women. The subconscious identification with the monster – and the fear that its hideous, subversive side could emerge at any time – triggers hatred as a defence mechanism. By watching Mrs Hyde's face, women watch also their own reflections in a version of themselves they find too hard to believe in or identify with: 'Although they constitute themselves collective enemies of Mrs Hyde, in so far as she threatens their whole being simply by existing, they also need her, and feed off her. The conflict, of course, is internal, as she is part of each of them'.[25]

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[24] Elphinstone 1992, p. 51.
[25] Elphinstone 1992, p. 52.

The several levels of fragmentation observed in *Two Women of London* have established a number of similarities between Stevenson's original and Tennant's transposition. Besides the clear thematic resemblances, a cluster of details directly borrowed from Stevenson's text – the main characters' names (Jekyll, Hyde) the servant's surname, Grace Poole (a reference also to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*), and the use of an umbrella as a deadly weapon – enhance the similarities between the hypotext and the hypertext. Similarities aside, there is a fundamental difference between Stevenson's and Tennant's use of the doppelgänger. The human metamorphosis and the longing for an alter ego originate from opposite desires in Stevenson's and Tennant's texts. In the hypotext, Jekyll is tempted by his weakness to achieve his own pleasures through the persona of Edward Hyde and keep his own honour and respectability safe at the same time. The scientific experiment of human duplication that Jekyll carries out on his own body originates from a moral dilemma. Son of Victorian moralism and yet challenged to overcome the limits of his scientific knowledge, Jekyll's attempt is an escape from the constrictions imposed by his society:

> It was on the moral side, and in my own person, that I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both. (p. 82)

The artificial separation of evil from good allows Jekyll's temporary transformation into Mr Hyde, an alter ego who is thoroughly evil and ignores all moral principles. The coexistence of both souls within the same body results in a double personality, while the evil, amoral Mr Hyde enjoys the unlimited freedom of misconduct that a Victorian society denies Dr Jekyll.

The contemporary time setting and gender shift in Tennant's text present a very different scenario. Due to a traumatic nervous breakdown, Eliza Jekyll has suffered a precocious and rapid ageing process. The disappointment and consequent depression are apparently triggered by the abrupt realisation that

the world is not the idyllic place Eliza had believed in as a child. This sudden delusion and the abrupt conclusion to Eliza's dream is the beginning of her fall:

> My husband left me.
> I became a slut. I struck my children.
> [...] Sometimes I think of the man who comes and visits me as the rapist, and sometimes as the old rock-star who owns the building and wants to tear it down and put it up again without me. Or the man who I went to see when I first took the drug and I put my hair up high and painted my nails and went out in high heels.
> And he gave me a job. In the gallery. (p. 256)

The psychological trauma deprives Eliza of the looks she needs to be a successful career woman and a pleasing wife. After the loss of her husband, Eliza desperately attempts to find a solution to her financial and social problems, which she temporarily solves through the ultimate concoction of drugs capable of returning her youth and former beauty. Though artificial, beauty is the key to Eliza's success. Without it she would be none other than the creature despised by the whole neighbourhood, the social outcast, Mrs Hyde. Tennant's formula emphasises the feminist issues at the core of her novel. As Stevenson's tale of duplication defied the moral code imposed by Victorian society. Tennant's *Two Women of London* challenges the persistent patriarchal order of late twentieth-century society by reversing the process of human metamorphosis. While Man has a *choice* to wear Mr Hyde's mask to pursue his own pleasure, for Woman it is a *necessity* to escape Mrs Hyde's pit and find a shelter in the myth of eternal beauty, youth and power. Tennant's rewriting focuses on the social pressure women suffer in order to keep family, career and a desirable aspect.[26] Eliza's curve of success after her transformation underlines the connection between women's careers and their looks. Power, success and, ultimately, happiness justify Eliza's last resort to use drugs to regain her lost beauty, and her choice to keep Mrs Hyde away from the judgemental eyes of her new social circle. As in Stevenson's text, reliance on drugs causes Eliza to develop an increasing addiction to larger and

[26] Carol Anderson 'Emma Tennant, Elspeth Barker, Alice Thompson: Gothic Revisited', in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 117-30 (p. 120).

larger doses. Beside the physical side-effects (at the end Eliza is unable to control her transformation) the character is the object of moralising comments. The other women, partly jealous of her quick way to success and partly aware of the strangeness of her looks, make sharp remarks about Eliza's career. In Mara's words: 'Eliza is the kind of woman who gives women a bad name [...]. She's the kind of woman who believes she is a post-feminist. Whatever that means – getting what you want in the old way while pretending you care for equality and other old-fashioned concepts' (p. 191). Eliza is trapped in a no-win situation: on one side, she needs to regain her beauty and looks to pursue success and happiness; on the other, in her attempt to survive the social jungle, she loses the other women's favours and camaraderie. Unlike Stevenson's Jekyll who, apart from Dr Lanyon's disapproval, is a highly respected professional, Eliza finds it impossible to reconcile success, power, and happiness.

Finally, perhaps the most disturbing difference between Stevenson's and Tennant's texts is disclosed by the conclusion. Unlike Stevenson's novella, Tennant leaves the ending ambiguously open, with Jekyll / Hyde alive, even if at a safe distance. Eliza, forever trapped in the hideous body of Mrs Hyde and charged with the murder of Jeremy Toller, has mysteriously vanished from the neighbourhood. Despite her physical absence, the threat of all that Mrs Hyde has represented is still very much present, not only in the secluded London neighbourhood, but also in Scotland, where Jean Hastie has decided to foster Eliza's children. Mrs Hyde is still present at the end of the story. She represents all women who are victims of patriarchal society and its pressures. Like Eliza, all women have the potential to follow the re-visited Jekyll's dream, the easy way to obtain eternal beauty, although they have been warned of the risk they incur: they could just as quickly turn into Mrs Hyde, disposable objects of a consumerist society. Nevertheless, the ambiguous ending of *Two Women of London* leaves a sinister openness. Alive, dangerous and ready to strike again, Mrs Hyde is also the attacker, the subversive 'newly born woman', a metamorphic witch with her own legacy left behind, in Scotland.

The thematic and structural duality and the Scottish background of *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London* are also relevant features of Tennant's third Scottish novel, *Wild Nights*. A difference from the other two works is the employment of a stronger surrealism of imagery and characterisation, partly inherited from Tennant's interest in South American magic-realism.[27] This detachment from the Scottish supernatural tradition, however, is accompanied by the typically Scottish dualism, and the wild, unmistakeable Scottishness of the bleak setting. The title of the novel, *Wild Nights*, is borrowed from one of Emily Dickinson's best-known poems:

> Wild Nights — Wild Nights!
> Were I with thee
> Wild Nights should be
> Our Luxury!
>
> Futile — the Winds —
> To a Heart in port —
> Done with the Compass—
> Done with the Chart!
>
> Rowing in Eden —
> Ah, the Sea!
> Might I but moor — Tonight —
> In Thee![28]

Tennant lifts several elements from Dickinson's enigmatic poem to express the various dichotomies at the core of her narrative: everything seems to be juxtaposed through a set of mirror images and opposing characters. The conflict and correspondences between two worlds – the outer, 'real' one and the poet's visionary dimension – links Dickinson's poem to Tennant's narrative. Conflict, expressed by Dickinson through vividly sensual imagery, relates to the observation of landscape and weather changes. Wildness is a key to interpreting the paradoxical conflict and the longing for harmony and peace in Dickinson's poem. Tennant transplants the visual power of nature into the wilderness of the Scottish landscape, to create the powerful contrast between

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[27] See Kenyon, pp. 179-181.

[28] Emily Dickinson, 'Wild Nights — Wild Nights!' (c. 1861), *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 114.

North and South, Scotland and England, winter and spring. Landscape performs a crucial role in the narrative, as it reflects characters' moods, plot developments and the magic aura of the novel. Climate cycles follow each other around in an endless circle, an element that reinforces the ancestral bond between characters and landscape. Aunt Zita's arrival, for example, coincides with the dramatic passage from summer into autumn. The equinoctial changes brought by the narrator's aunt summarise the abrupt seasonal change: 'The days outside, which were long and white at that time of the year, closed and turned like a shutter, a sharp blue night coming on sudden and unexpected as a finger caught in a hinge'.[29] After the dark winter in Scotland, the arrival of spring is witnessed South of the border, where the family moves seasonally to witness the process of nature's awakening. Uncle Rainbow and Aunt Letty's household is the polar opposite of the Scottish setting. Here, nature is positive, harmonious, forceful and the couple, who embody the sweetest and longed for seasonal change, are at peace with all the elements. The narrator, who tells the story of her childhood memories, recalls the beginning of Letty's metamorphosis at the beginning of spring in the surreal tones of a dream:

> It seemed that another woman grew beside her in the mud, and with enormous limbs overcame and subsumed Letty. The pool waited for the first splash of the creature as it went to the depth. [...] as the ripples went out from her body, the light began to show through the trees, and the pool, like an eye hidden in the bushy woods, wept at the first rays of the sun. (p. 376)

Tennant's attachment to the themes adopted in the other two Scottish novels is overt: metamorphosis and human duplication play an important role in the magic atmosphere of *Wild Nights*. There is a mysterious relationship between human beings and the laws of the universe: both sides of the equation affect each other in a vicious circle. Aunt Zita, for example, brings the darkness of autumn and, later on in the year, is symbolically burnt on the last day of October, the night when the spirits, traditionally, come back to life in disguise.

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[29] Emma Tennant, *Wild Nights*, in *The Bad Sister, An Emma Tennant Omnibus*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000) p. 273. Further references to this edition are given after quotation in the text.

With Aunt Zita's extinguished fire, the first snow, a reminder that the heart of winter is still to come, lowers the curtain over 'the arena of memory and magic' (p. 355). The passion for the undisclosed recipient of Dickinson's poem also establishes a second parallel between the American poem and Tennant's novel. In *Wild Night*, passion is the governing force at the core of the family saga: as soon as she arrives, Aunt Zita causes discomfort and unease. Her perpetual, burning fire, is a symbol of her undying passion for her older brother. Passion is another element of division. The incestuous relationship between Zita and her elder brother causes rivalry and a conflicting sectarianism within the family, for the narrator's father is also infatuated with her. Their incestuous embrace, symptomatically, extinguishes Zita's fire, almost to signify the animal instinct sated by the sexual act, rather than the human desire for partnership: 'The fire diminished and went out. It left a pad on the carpet, like an inkspot. It seemed thick, and didn't creep towards Aunt Zita and her elder brother, who now lay in each other's arms' (p. 304). The magical embrace serves as a propitiatory ritual, allowing the weather change that Zita's arrival had already forewarned. The copious rain which follows the sexual encounter ironically falls over the mother's and father's picnic. The climatic changes brought over by Zita re-emphasise the connection between the family division and the weather.

Zita's burning fire is more than just a metaphor for her passionate temperament and unfulfilled desire. This and other representations of the magic underworld emerge from the surreal atmosphere of the Scottish household and the nearby village. Zita is the epitome of the mysterious world which fascinates the narrator's imagination. Though charismatic, her charms can be frightening representations of the darkest sides of this magic world:

> Aunt Zita came into the room, for the first time since her arrival on the doorstep, and the faint, flickering blue flame that had played round with her then had become stranger in colour, tinged with red at the tips like a fire-bearing bird. Her face was pale [...] as she was continually consumed and resurrected by the flames she lived bloodlessly amongst them [...] and her lips, a dead magenta colour, were always smiling. (p. 278)

Even as a common element, magic still perpetrates the division between North and South, and the narrator is keenly conscious of the existence of the borders between the two worlds. In the North, Aunt Zita's vampiric aura is emblematic of the sinister atmosphere pervading the Scottish household, its surroundings and the 'pagan winds' that blow incessantly over them. As soon as she arrives, 'ghostly maids' are summoned up to share the same house and follow Zita around. Just like Zita's perennial fire, the appearance of ghosts in the narrative adds to the magic-realist character of the story. If she wants to, Zita can summon up fire spirits; her maids defy the reader's suspension of disbelief because they become a familiar sight in the household and are accepted as part of the narrative's 'real' world.

Likewise, the narrator's perception of the women at Peg's village shop is equally disturbing in its 'normal' setting. Peg avoids being called a witch only because the money used in the transactions makes her more tangible. Though she does escape any uncanny connection, the narrator thinks differently of the women at Peg's shop: 'These great women, whose bodies could for all she knew have ended in mermaids' tails beneath the counter — or be welded together, like fairground monsters — were for a time at one in the presence of Peg' (p. 286).

A question could be posed about the narrator's reliability. Her journey through her childhood memories is inevitably affected by the time gap and the child's point of view. The time ellipsis can transform memories, delete some details and add more, while her childhood's perspective distorts reality and makes the boundaries between reality and imagination difficult to discern. This is why the narrative is a mixture of magic and realism: the narrator's memories are merged with the child's dreams, her expectations and her secret desires. This is exemplified by the escapist dream often referred to in the first part of the narrative. The Northern hostility and the smallness of the village push all characters to wish for an escape, away from the bleakness and the darkness of the Scottish winter. Thus, the mother, the village teacher and the narrator

herself all yearn to run away, but only the narrator succeeds in fulfilling her dream in a very singular way: on Aunt Zita's wings.

The magic journey, the ghostly maids, the village monsters all exemplify the mysterious magic of the North. The power of Scottish superstitions is opposed to the rational, scientific undercurrent represented by Uncle Ralph's inventions, which symptomatically hardly ever function, and the mother's inability to comprehend the uncanny episodes of her husband's family saga:

> My poor mother! Still lived in the age of cause and consequence, of foreshadowings and outcomes, and she couldn't see the connections between Aunt Zita and the fading lights. My father, who was a century ahead of his brother Ralph [but] was still firmly rooted in the mechanical age [...](p. 278).

Whereas in the North rationalism and harmony are defeated by irrationality and superstition, in the South the balance of the opposition shifts towards more positivist forces. The Southern magic is the dormant, faint memory of the old pagan rituals, rather than the Northern vivid set of rituals and surreal scenarios. The pagan beliefs still very much alive in Scotland have evolved into a harmonious well being and a peaceful communion with nature in the South. The Southern blissful peace is, however, the cause for the re-enacted division within the family. The mother's inability to cope with her husband's sinister relations in the North finds its counterpart in the father's intolerance towards the harmony of the English landscape and his yearning for the Northern darkness and intransigence in the South. The sectarian division persists South of the border, this time with the narrator's father disagreeing with the rest of his family.

The division between the North and the South and the frictions within the family take place in an uncannily undefined time setting. The narrator's perception of time affects the chronological structure of the story. As already mentioned, *Wild Night* re-enacts Tennant's childhood memories in an atypical narrative where there is no real plot, personalities fluctuate, settings are surreal and historical time is suspended. As in Dickinson's poem, time is an undefined dimension whose contours lose any meaning in the universal world of fiction.

However, in *Wild Nights* cyclical time is omnipresent, as seasonal change seems to dictate responses in the characters. In other words, linear chronology has failed or has been rejected in this world. Dimensions interpenetrate.

Unlike the first two novels, where specific time settings – the 1970s for *The Bad Sister* and the 1980s for *Two Women of London* – are engaged with contemporary social and gender issues, the narrative of *Wild Nights* is free from fixed time boundaries. Though references to the war seem to set the novel in 1940s, the author disseminates hints to a less strict concept of time through the characters' subjective perceptions: the father, who is a century ahead of his brother, is still very much 'in the mechanical age' (p. 279), like the mother, who lives 'in the age of cause and consequence' (p. 279). The three characters live in a rationally ordered world, juxtaposed to the spiritual world embodied by Zita and the ghosts she is able to summon up. The rational order of the mechanical world corresponds to a specific age whereas Zita and her maids belong to a timeless dimension. Paradoxically, time becomes an undefined dimension: with no certain points of reference the order of events loses its importance, and the story becomes a chaotic cycle of recurring episodes. The house décor, too, is reminiscent of Victorian vestiges: the Gothic-styled stonework, Victorian Gargoyles, William Morris curtains, a piano 'clothed with frilled knickerbockers' (p. 291). Past and present struggle to survive, in the timeless dimension moving between static antiquity and the incoming 'metamorphosis' of the narrative cycles. As a consequence of the temporal fluidity of the setting, the narrative flows free from the social issues tackled in the other two novels. In fact, *Wild Nights* takes the shape of a surreal journal: as in a dream, the episodes resemble disconnected hallucinations and memory merges with imagination.

However, the surrealism of *Wild Nights'* family saga conveys the ideas of division and duality found also in the first two novels. Tennant portrays Scotland and England as two polar extremes. The opposites are expressed on many levels, and through several sets of dichotomies within family relations, landscapes and the alternating seasons. Tennant creates a singular magic-realist text where the plot almost loses coherence and significance in a maze of

images and symbolism. The cold winter house in the North haunted by the visits of Aunt Zita and her 'ghostly maids' is thus juxtaposed to Uncle Rainbow's house in the South, surrounded by a country 'deceptively and violently green' (p. 365), where Letty gives birth to the sun, signifying the start of springtime. The father's voluntary choice to return to the cold and inhospitable land of Scotland makes the cycle return to its beginning, foreseeing similar episodes of the endless saga.

The Bad Sister, *Two Women of London* and *Wild Nights* establish transtextual relationship with pre-existing texts. The close rewritings of Hogg's and Stevenson's texts highlight similarities, while, simultaneously, departing from the source texts, to highlight different issues, subvert gender hierarchies and make feminist statements. In a slightly different way, Dickinson's poem inspires the unruliness of magic in *Wild Nights*. Landscape, characters, feelings: an uncanny wildness pervades each of these aspects in the narrative. As much as the content, wildness affects also the form: the use of surreal imagery is more persistent here than in Tennant's previous Scottish novels. The three narratives also hide a number of less extensive intertextual allusions and quotations: William Wordsworth (epigraph to *The Bad Sister*), Marina Tsvetayeva (epigraph to Jane Wilde's memoirs) and Karl Miller (*Two Women of London*'s dedicatee) enhance the thematic dualities of the texts. As in work by Elphinstone, Hayton and Smith, the use of epigraphs and other forms of intertextuality establishes a layered relationship with other texts, adding complexity to her own narratives. The diversity of this network of cited authors enhances the idea of a dialectic plurality of traditions moving in different directions and at the same time all concentrating on the making of one text.

Yet, the three novels all feature an evident influence derived from Scottish literary and cultural traditions. Tennant's employment of supernatural themes – the tropes of the double and the dangerous woman – stems from the fascination with her Scottish background, as it is drawn from the uncanny nature of the supernatural in Scottish literature, with its dark representations of

magic placed in the 'real' world. Tennant's Scottish novels undermine any safe rational boundary of 'reality', which becomes a relative concept, blurred by the subjective perceptions of deranged, unreliable, schizoid characters. While objective stories are deconstructed, narrators are proved to be unreliable in *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London*, and the 'real' world is dressed in the surreal colours of dreams in the hallucinatory narrative of *Wild Nights*. Identities are never fixed. Tennant borrows from the long tradition of unreliable Scottish protagonists. Modelling her characters on Hogg's Wringhim and Stevenson's Jekyll, Tennant brings her fascination with fragmented minds and multiple personalities into play. Fragmentation is the most typical characteristic present at each level of Tennant's fiction, in individual characters (Jane and Eliza), in families (Aunt Zita and her brothers), in countries (Scotland and England), in cities (London), and in time (the timelessness of *Wild Nights* and chronological fragmentation in *Two Women of London* and *The Bad Sister*).

The schizoid narratives are pulled between opposed forces, desire for unity and creative entropy. The conflict and paradox at the heart of Tennant's fiction exposes the author's awareness of the fragmented, anarchic, dynamic Scottish fantasy tradition, but her narratives reflect both the desire to belong to that tradition and be within the boundaries, and the urge to challenge and go further and beyond the boundaries set by convention, society and literary canons. It is the need to fill this gap, a desire to reach and find out what lies beyond, that drives her writing. From the need to question – and to find answers – from an inner 'lack', as Tennant puts it, stems the ultimate purpose of her writing.[30]

[30] Haffenden, p. 304

Chapter Seven

Real Gorgons or Fantastic Chimeras?
Re-shaping Myth and Tradition:
Alice Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*

She is flesh-and blood in my dream
Of light, created, her creation is this.
Cry of bird in a rainswept garden.
Vague outlines of egg, sea, silence, sound:
Drawn on the curtains at the window.
Deep-seated sun, crystal music, glass, fossil fire –
The patter of rain on the street outside the window.

(Alan Riach, from 'Material of Dream')

Real Gorgons or Fantastic Chimeras? Re-shaping Myth and Tradition: Alice Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*

Dangerous women are a persistent feature in Alice Thompson's fiction. The polyvalent monstrosity of the archetypal demonic creatures is the principal manifestation of the magical ambiguities of Thompson's narratives. In an article published in 1992, Margaret Elphinstone described one of the four traditional elements in contemporary women's fantasy in Scotland with these words:

> A significant part of the Scottish heritage for women writers now is the figure of the dangerous woman. In twentieth-century writing she may sometimes seem to align herself with a feminist perspective, but she refuses to become quite ideologically sound. She is too sinister for that. She has appeared since the ballads as the daughter of the other world, with all the danger and the glamour that that implies. In modern fantasy her refusal to accommodate herself to a world of known boundaries and social realism may be related to her psychological alienation from the patriarchal model. But with the other world open to her, she becomes more than subversive, she is perilous, and perhaps, in terms of accepted moralities, downright evil.[1]

Elphinstone's outline of the 'dangerous woman' establishes three crucial points: first, evil and glamour are connected, the dangerous woman is more often a charming creature than a repulsive hag, and her bewitching charms represent her most successful strategy to achieve her goals; second, especially in twentieth-century literature, the dangerous woman rejects conventions imposed by patriarchal society, and does not conform to what is socially acceptable; third, the dangerous woman is a central figure in the development of a feminist literary theory – from Cixous and Clément's 'sorceress' to Gilbert and Gubar's 'madwoman in the attic' – while her subversive nature relates her especially to the debate on the politics of women's fantasy. This succinct evaluation of the dangerous woman is relevant to Thompson's use of the trope in *Justine* (1996)

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[1]Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition', in *Tea and Leg Irons: New Feminist Readings From Scotland*, ed. by Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992), pp. 45-59 (p. 45).

and *Pandora's Box* (1998). As seen in the previous chapters of this thesis, Elphinstone's observation has certainly proved to be not only insightful but also prophetic about the fiction published in later years and in the last two decades of the twentieth century the number of 'dangerous women' in novels by women writers is remarkable. Within the boundaries of this thesis, the fiction of Margaret Elphinstone, Sian Hayton and Emma Tennant hosts several female characters whose degrees and manifestations of dangerousness and evil may vary, although Elphinstone's Gudrid, Hayton's Marighal and Tennant's Mrs Hyde are all subversive, dangerous, and, often, unaccepted figures.

Both Justine and Pandora are ambiguous creatures. They are not straightforwardly evil. Their existence is wrapped in mystery, their behaviour unpredictable and their looks metamorphic. Like the archetypal witch, they can be good and evil, beautiful and frightening, generous and cruel, demons and angels, petrifying monsters and unobtainable beauties. Perhaps the most frightening of the characterisations of dangerous women are the mythical gorgons, who embody the paradoxical coexistence of opposite qualities: 'in the earliest versions they are very ugly with snaky hair, staring eyes, fearsome grins and lolling tongues, boar's tusks and a striding gait. Later, however, Medusa can be beautiful'.[2] Originally repulsive, in later mythology, gorgons often embody the antinomy of beauty and evil. Since their beauty is impossible to possess and their charms their most dangerous weapons, feminist criticism has often used the gorgon as a symbol for the ambiguous and subversive force inner to the female mind. As emphasised by Hélène Cixous in her influential article 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

> Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they only have to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.[3]

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[2] Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassel and Co., 1998), 337-338.

[3] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), in *Feminisms. An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, second paperback edition (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 334-49 (p. 342).

Cixous's gorgon (Medusa) channels the passionate criticism of a phallocentric, patriarchal system that has failed to acknowledge women and their subversive force. The metaphoric gorgon – exemplified through persistent references to male-made female myths (the gorgons and the sirens) – embodies the self-ironic invitation to social dissidence, to overcome constrictions imposed by a male-centred political and social system and ultimately express the individual voice of woman. Like Cixous, Thompson's exploits symbols adopted from classical myth and traditional religion to endorse her gender agenda. Her protagonists embody the gorgons' dichotomy: though extremely beautiful, their bodies conceal fatal surprises for their lovers. Both the male protagonists of *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* become obsessed with their impossible lovers, whose unobtainable beauty is subversively turned into a curse.

Escaping the lover's embrace, Thompson's gorgons also escape definition. As Justine and Pandora challenge theories of gender – responding to critical arguments against gender binary categorisation – their enigmatic existence also poses ontological and epistemological questions. Thompson's characters resemble chimeras, metaphors for impossible imaginary creations, as their existence belongs exclusively to the creative mind of the male characters. Justine and Pandora are simultaneously gorgons (beautiful, evil, dangerous women) and chimeras (psychological projections or delusions).

Thompson's employment of transtextuality, mainly through intertextual references and allusions to precedent texts or myths, enhance the critical position exposed by the tropes and characterisation. A string of mythological literary references – starting from the opening epigraphs taken from Shakespeare and Hesiod in the two novels – reveal Thompson's strategy to challenge the textual boundaries of her own narratives, with the dissemination of cryptic and overt allusions to a variety of authors and texts, from Ovid's *Metamorphosis* to Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). As Thompson admits: 'I write for the ideal reader. I like the people who read my books to be attentive and open-minded and to enjoy being surprised. That would be my ideal reader: someone who doesn't want things confirmed but

wants things disturbed'.[4] Within the variety of textual references employed by Thompson, her intertextual allusions reveal a relationship with Scottish non-realistic texts and authors, from James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson, to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Alasdair Gray. Thompson's narratives adopt a notion of the supernatural, which, she admits, distinctively pervades Scottish fantasy:

> I think it's very strong, from James Hogg to Alasdair Gray and A.L. Kennedy... I think it is stronger in Scotland than it is in England. I don't know whether it's because of the landscape; it's wild and unfathomable. English landscape is neat, less dramatic and has a smaller perspective. We certainly have a stronger tradition of magic in our writing. From the folk-tales of the selkies onwards, there has always been that background in Scottish literature, based on magical happenings.[5]

As well as a persistent theme and source for imagery, the supernatural assumes deeper significance as Thompson identifies an investigative element throughout Scottish fantasy, focussing on philosophical questions:

> There is a philosophical aspect to Scottish writing, which stems from the enlightenment... There is a willingness and an eagerness and a desperation to explore philosophical questions through fiction. Certainly Scottish writers do use the supernatural. Ali Smith uses ghosts and A. L. Kennedy does too. But a more conclusive or comprehensive generalisation would be to say that Scottish writing has a philosophical bent, inclusive of the supernatural but not confined to it.[6]

In *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* Thompson engages with these distinctively Scottish philosophical questions. Ontological and epistemological issues are articulated in conjunction with feminist preoccupations. As gender categories and roles slowly crumble, the rational ability to understand collapses and unsolved enigmas sweep away any certainty. The texts also insinuate a meta-fictional question about the possibility for a story to be narrated: the reader

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[4] See 'Interview with Alice Thompson', Appendix.
[5] See 'Interview with Alice Thompson', Appendix.
[6] See 'Interview with Alice Thompson', Appendix.

comes to doubt not only the characters' reliability, but also the stability of the narrative itself.

Thompson's *Justine* echoes the title of Sade's novel *Justine or The Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), the story of a beautiful orphan, Justine, who, abandoned to her destiny in the world with nothing but her honour, strives to defend it in the name of what she believes in above anything else, virtue. After her father's financial collapse, at the start of her 'misfortunes', Justine is with her twin sister, Juliette, whose story is also narrated in Sade's *Juliette or The Triumph of Vice* (1797). Unlike Justine, Juliette is not concerned with her virtue but determined to exploit the only valuable thing she believes she has been left with: beauty. Within the main narrative of *Justine*, Sade ironically draws on a brief synopsis of Juliette's picaresque life as a prostitute – she makes her first fortune selling her virginity to eighty different customers – and finally a mistress, before focusing on the tragic episodes of Justine's life. While Justine faces unfair imprisonment, rape and is forced to endure all sorts of tortures and sexual abuse in the name of her faith and virtue, Juliette makes her fortune relentlessly deceiving and exploiting her charms and her victims' lust.

Both of Sade's characters and his novels appear in Thompson's *Justine*.[7] As in Sade's novel, Justine and Juliette are, allegedly, twins, although their polar personalities are not as clear-cut as in the French original. Furthermore, the triangle established by the homosexual Marquis de Bressac, his mother and Justine arguably constitutes a direct background to Thompson's *Justine*, which takes the shape of a first person memoir. A sinister light pervades the relationship between the narrator, whose name remains undisclosed, and his mother, both obsessed with beauty and a hedonist weakness for aesthetic pleasure: their art collections fulfil their compulsive desire to possess beauty and be surrounded by it. The centrality of the obsessive passion which the narrator nurtures for his mother and, later, Justine, is anticipated by the first lines of the epigraphic quotation from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer*

[7] Anderson 2000.

Night's Dream: 'Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends'. A Byronic clubfoot flaws the harmony of the narrator's body, which is otherwise gifted with an 'Adonis' face. His mother's inability to accept his malformation throughout his childhood is an early symptom of their disturbing bond and their mutual obsession and pursuit of ideal beauty. Perhaps because of her incumbent death, the narrator's recollections of his mother's beauty disclose a disturbingly morbid connotation: 'she had a face as pale and hard as a pearl and her mouth was congealed from the blood-red drop of a ruby'.[8] The narrator's love of beauty is acknowledged in terms of voyeuristic attraction towards his mother: 'She would be sitting, half-naked at the mirror, her round full breasts reflected in the glass so that I could feast upon them from every angle' (p. 4). Oedipal feelings intensify on one night of the narrator's 'thirteenth summer'. The heat of his bed has drawn him outside where he has a peculiar vision of his mother standing in the terrace of their mansion:

> Like a ghost, my mother, in transparent silk, her back turned to me, stood on its wide steps. One of her pilgrims stood beside her, his face reflecting blankly the light of the moon. From the centre of the cool water of the lake, I watched this strange man shut his forget-me-not eyes, as with her mouth she plucked out his heart through his open lips. (p. 6)

The reference to the number thirteen, always associated with ill fortune, and the mother's vampiric action contribute to the strange darkly magic aura of the scene. This sinister marriage of death and beauty embodied by his mother has haunted the narrator from the earliest stages of his childhood, as he admits in the quoted passage at the beginning of his memoirs. The obsessive cult of beauty reaches its extreme in the mother's mental disintegration, triggered by the inability to accept the inevitable decay of physical beauty. Unable to cope with the twilight of the myth nurtured all her life, his mother starts mutilating all the objects of beauty collected during her blossoming youth. The mutilations,

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[8] Alice Thompson, *Justine* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), p. 1. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

reminiscent of the mutilations suffered by Sade's Justine, are performed 'with surgical precision' (p. 7) and emphasise the sinister aura permeating the narrator's perception of his own mother.

The mother's ageing process triggers a role reversal as the narrator – in a veiled allusion to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) – becomes younger and younger, as his mother's beauty fades. Significantly, it is in the last days of his life before his mother's death that the narrator has his first contact with Justine, as he has chosen to call the enigmatic lady immortalised on one of his canvases. The painting, vaguely reminiscent of the Arthurian legend of the Lady of Shalot, features a woman sitting in a cell 'whose bars flung their shadows across the left-hand side of her face' (p. 10), an image mirrored, a few pages later, on the mother's face on her deathbed: 'Mascara ran down her cheeks in black lines like the bars of a cage' (p. 12). The correlation between Justine and death is also reinforced by the narrator himself, when he meets Justine at his mother's funeral: 'Justine and Death had a natural affinity for each other: they followed each other around' (p. 14). After the first casual encounter, the expression of Justine's portrait incongruously changes from an expressionless, motionless beauty, to a 'malevolent' look. To the narrator's opium-fed eyes, Justine appears willing to escape, and although he imagines seeing her face in every woman's face, when he finally thinks he has found the real Justine, he is disappointed to realise that it is only Justine's twin sister, Juliette.

Justine and Juliette are paradoxically identical and polar opposites. Although the narrator is often unable to tell the difference between the two sisters' voices and their looks, at other times, he is, conversely, asserting his ability to distinguish between them. Juliette, it is said, has a child-like, naïve expression on her face; her emotions are manifestly visible in her face. On the contrary, Justine's beauty grows increasingly more enigmatic as the story develops. Far from being transparent about her emotions, she is rather 'the tabula rasa, [...], that begged me to write all over her' (p. 28). Despite her apparent transparency, Juliette, however, gives the impression of having a

'troubled sexuality' (p. 22) and, moreover, the description of her face reveals an ambiguous vampiric quality: 'She had a smudge of red paint on her cheek near her left ear, that looked like blood' (p. 21). The vampiric aura on Juliette's face, a sinister comparison with the narrator's mother, and the suspicion that she might be a witch clash with the enigmatic expression on her face: 'She was like a cracked mirror, always self-reflecting an image that was deformed' (p. 35). From the moment of his encounter with Juliette, the story becomes a complicated maze of identity and role reversals. Willing to exploit Juliette's attraction for him to entrap Justine, the narrator discovers, to his disappointment, that he has, in turn, been the victim of Juliette's plot against Justine: 'I felt violated by the act of sex that had taken place in Juliette's flat. That Juliette had been using her body as a means to an end made the whole encounter seem even more obscure' (p. 49). The narrator's identity becomes more confused about his role in his relationship with Justine and Juliette. His encounter with Justine reveals further clues about the process of identity disintegration permeating the whole story. Justine, too, starts to question her own identity when, after the alleged publication of her novel, she is being stalked by a mysterious reader obsessed with the character in her novel. This is, in her own words 'A typical case of literary mistaken identity' (p. 57). Despite her attempt to understand and rationalise the reasons behind the admirer's obsession, Justine admits that she is 'beginning to wonder who I am' (p. 58). Halfway through his memoir, the narrator also begins to wonder about Justine's identity and questions her existence: 'The real Justine never existed. Justine was an impostor: she was just an empty shell of living insects. Justine, like her picture, wasn't real at all, she was another fabrication' (p. 61). His confusion increases as he becomes aware that he is unable to tell Justine and Juliette apart. The inability to differentiate the two women affects the narrator's loss of his own identity, exemplified when he cannot recognise his own reflection in a mirror. Finally, a glimpse of the truth runs through his mind as he begins to think: 'I wondered in a moment of despair if the last few weeks had only been a dream, an invention of my own making' (p. 70). This theory, which appears to

be the most plausible, is also supported by several other episodes in the story. Juliette admits she is Justine's other half while Jack, Justine's lover, believes that 'there are different versions of Justine' (p. 95). Towards the end of the story the role reversal and identity loss are made more evident as the narrator becomes Justine's prisoner in the attempt to set her free from her abductor. The increasing psychological split in the narrator culminates in his detached perspective from his own divided self: 'I then seem to split into two people as I watch, from a position high up in the sky, myself walk inside the house and disappear, the door shutting behind me' (p. 103). The narrator's mental disintegration is stressed through the veiled reference to Hogg's Wringhim from *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a A Justified Sinner*:

> I generally conceived myself to be two people. When I lay in bed, I deemed there were two of us in it; [...] The most perverse part of it was, that I rarely conceived *myself* to be any of the two persons. I thought for the most part that my companion was one of them, and my brother the other (pp. 125-126).

The feelings of displacement increase as Thompson's narrator admits to be 'on the verge of unreality' (p. 108). This, together, with other references to the dream state and hallucinations of the opium-smoking narrator throughout the story, constitutes a crucial statement, as reinforced by the narrator belief that 'My desire, once consummated, would justify reality. Or rather give back reality to what I saw around me. It would make life real' (p. 110). At this stage it seems clear that the narrator has become aware of the hallucination that began with his mother's death. The connections with his mother are made more manifest in the final stages of his dream, when he mirrors his mother's murder of her own lover, in the act of plucking Jack's heart out. What could be a metaphorical hallucination of a sexual encounter signifies the narrator's dissatisfaction with the fulfilment of his desires as he fails to find Jack's heart in his body.

Justine is the product of his imagination, born out of his mother's death. The identification between the two, already pointed out in the cage imagery shared by Justine and the narrator's mother at the moment of her death, is also emphasised by the fact that the narrator begins his hallucination after his

mother's death. The traumas derived from his witnessing the physical decay of his mother's body, and finally her death, has cracked the myth of beauty forever. Thus, his fantasy – Justine – is both unobtainable beauty and death, and her novel, significantly entitled *Death is a Woman*, has never been published. The narrator's obsession with beauty creates the dream of Justine and Juliette, who embody the paradox typical of all Scottish doubles from Hogg's *Justified Sinner* to Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*. Thompson visually emphasises doubleness through the use of mirror images and constant repetitions, also visible in the paratext of the novel: in the first edition the front and back covers are reverse mirror images of each other. Likewise, at the very end, when the narrator finally wakes up in the exact 'replica' of his own flat in Kensington Gardens, he is surrounded by his library: 'The shadows are only books. When I hold up their pages to the light, the paper of many of them is so thin that the words on the other side shine backwards, through' (p. 137).

Thompson's reworking of Sade's novels reveals a three-fold subversive intention. First of all, the two women characters epitomising virtue and vice in Sade's novels become one ambiguous creature embodying beauty and evil, prisoner and victim, prey and pursuer. Unlike Sade, Thompson merges the characters into one woman who is unintelligible and has the ability to be everything: whore and femme fatal, a 'real' woman and a hallucination. As Justine explains, it is impossible to divide the two sides of her character, something that the narrator and Jack have both tried, to their own expense:

> Did either of you really think you could divide me up that easily? [...] The characterizations were so basic. Omnipotent Justine and needy Juliette, virgin and whore. Just enough to titillate the preconceptions. You were both one of a kind, the murderer and the murderee. It was inevitable in the end that you had to cancel each other out. (p. 123)

Angela Carter's critical study of Sade's characters and the representation of women in pornography emphasises the issues of power within representations of sexuality in literature and pornography.[9] The dynamics of power discussed in

[9] See Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago: 1979).

The Sadeian Woman (1979) constitute a strong background to Thompson's re-making of Sadeian characters. While in Sade's novels, Justine is virtuous – and dies – and Juliette is dishonest – and repents – Thompson does not differentiate between the two. The hybrid gorgon Justine / Juliette embodies the ambivalence of a both Sadeian characters. Simultaneously virtuous 'virgin' and 'vicious' whore, Thompson's character escapes identification with binary categorisations of gender, enforced by Sade or the male narrator of Thompson's story. Free from superimposed gender constraints, Justine / Juliette is the embodiment of the undistinguished other, the unfathomable unknown, the enigmatically omnipotent 'newly born woman'. Consequently – and this is the second objective of Thompson subversive narrative – the narrator becomes the victim of Justine's evil power, a reversal of Justine's victimisation in Sade's novels. The power reversal is another clear element of Thompson's feminist critique of the male-dominated narratives by Sade, stressed by the fact that the narrator has become a victim of his own obsession. As Justine explains:

> The real victim of your obsession has not been me. It's been you all along. The prison I have made for you, and what I do to you inside it, is the physical manifestation of what you have been doing to yourself. I have simply transformed your obsession into literal truth. I have made your spiritual prison real. (p. 134)

Thirdly, the notion about Justine's power ceases to be only a gender issue but develops into a discourse about fiction, which suggests a questioning of the narrative reliability. Justine represents a double chimera. From an engendered theoretical perspective, she is the dream of the impossible female beauty, a projection of the narrator's desire to control and 'fix' her beauty. At a narrative level, however, Justine represents the disruption of narrative conventions. As she rebels to being imprisoned in the narrative, the narrator is trapped by his own chimera, which – like him – is simultaneously victim and jail-keeper. His narrative reliability and authorial control are overtly undermined at the very end, when Justine hands over her 'blank book' – just like the uncut pages of the first edition of Thompson's *Justine* – challenging the narrator to find out who she

really is. Fiction and reality merge and the boundaries between the two are blurred. As the narrator admits: 'She had her own thoughts and desires which had manipulated me. There was a parallel universe and it belonged to her. Worse, she had dragged me into it' (p. 125).

Pandora's Box merges classical myth with Biblical references in a supernatural story of death and rebirth, represented through a critical mixture of pagan and Christian iconography. Thematically, the story of Pandora's artificial birth through the skill and the scalpel of a plastic surgeon also establishes a parallel with other mythological and literary examples of artificial creation from Ovid's 'Pygmalion' to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831), and especially postmodernist texts such as Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992). The Greek myth of Pandora loosely inspires the content of the story, as it becomes, gradually, a channel for the author's agenda and an instrument for critical revision. Gender categorisation, the myth of beauty and epistemological questions are three crucial movements within Thompson's complex narrative.

Unlike *Justine*, where references to the Scottish tradition of the double are strongly relevant, *Pandora's Box* is less influenced by a distinctive Scottish tradition and, on the whole, is a more difficult novel to discuss. Its genre is, in the first place, hard to define. Though 'playfully cast in the genre of crime fiction',[10] as Susan Sellers writes, it is hard to limit this complex novel to one genre only. Like *Justine*, both character and novel resist to being limited by a single categorical definition, amplifying their complexities through continuous allusions to other texts and emphasising the subversive polyvalence at the core of intertextual rewriting.[11] The epigraph, taken from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, recalls the Greek myth of Pandora, the beautiful maiden sent by Zeus to punish mortals for their attempts to challenge the gods and steal fire from them. The creation of Pandora, whose name ironically means 'all gifts', epitomises

[10] Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 103.
[11] See Sellers 2001.

revenge, being the carrier of all the evils that have cursed humanity ever since the opening of her infamous jar.

The first three of the four sections of the story – 'Pandora's Box', 'Venus', 'Lazarus' and 'Noah' – follow three stages of Pandora's life: death ('Pandora'), birth ('Venus'), rebirth ('Lazarus'). The fourth and last section ('Noah') brings us to the final part of Noah's quest and an ambiguous happy ending. Throughout the first three sections of the novel there are three overlapping movements of deconstruction: first is the deconstruction of the myth of beauty, through a parody of the act of creation, as the artificial process through which Pandora is given a beautiful body lays bare Thompson's critical approach to the concept of beauty, already explored in *Justine*; second, is the dismantling of Noah's empirical certainties; third, is Pandora's challenge of gender boundaries. The three movements culminate in Noah's climactic encounter with Lazarus in the third section of the novel.

The plot starts with the discovery of a 'shadowy figure' in fire standing in the shape of a star, outside Dr Noah Close's door. Although the body is completely wrapped up in fire, the flames do not burn Noah. As a specialist in 'the reconstruction of human bodies', his reluctance to work on the body is a symptom of a fear of creation. The absence of any identifying details in the body provides Noah with an ambiguous dilemma: on one hand, the body constitutes an unfathomable source of mystery, with no clue about what it might have looked like before the accident; on the other hand, it is also a *tabula rasa*, and allows unlimited freedom to make decisions for what is about to become his surgical masterpiece. Placed just after the passage from Hesiod's account of Pandora's creation, Noah's creative dilemma is ominous, from the start. The body is so badly burnt that it is impossible for Noah to discern its gender. When Noah is finally persuaded to operate on the body, however, his decision to give it a female gender represents the crucial origin of the sinister story. By establishing that she is going to be a woman, Noah is projecting his own desire over the creature he will, later, be able to claim as his own:[12]

[12] See Sellers 2001.

> Her body became a landscape over which he had to cross, but he saw it in terms of square inches. The limitations of the future lay within the circumference of his immediate world. He took on her body a moment at a time. He was remoulding her not with the touch of human flesh but with the caress of the knife, the prickle of the needle — medical science had become an act of love.[13]

Though artificial plastic surgery replaces the act of creation, nevertheless the process establishes a bond between creator (Noah) and creature (Pandora). Noah's need for his creature to exist is made more manifest by her own provocative question, the only one she ever asks, when he surprises her in his own house: 'Don't you realise how much you need me?' (p. 19) Furthermore, the notion that Noah needs Pandora is reinforced by the references to religious and mythological accounts of creation. His naming of Pandora becomes a parody of the account of creation in Genesis,[14] and evoking Biblical authority, Thompson underlines Noah's statements as unilateral expressions of his own will and love: 'He liked the idea that he had created her, forged her out of fire. [...] He called her his wife. He called her Pandora' (p. 21). Noah marries his creation before she has a name. The naming, significant in the references it makes to the *Genesis* passage and the Greek myth quoted by the author at the beginning of the novel, is the second act of ownership which Noah exercises over his creature. Like the Greek myth of Pygmalion, 'he has created female life as he would like it to be – pliable, responsive, purely physical'.[15] Noah, whose name is reminiscent of the Biblical character and his grand quest, is pursuing something, which he believes he has found in Pandora. Noah's search for the myth of beauty is, however, unsuccessful and unfulfilling. Far from being a dream come true, Pandora is, in fact, about to transform Noah's life into a nightmare. The Biblical Noah attempted to save the world by containing all the creatures in the world in an ark, rescuing them from the destruction of the Flood. The paradox is that his quest for redemption is mirrored in Pandora's

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[13] Alice Thompson, *Pandora's Box* (London: Little Brown And Company, 1998), p. 10. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[14] See Genesis, 3:20.

[15] Susan Gubar, ' "The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity', in *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 73-93 (73).

containment of all the evils of the world in her magical box. Throughout the second section of the novel, other images of creation reiterate the centrality of the theme. After Pandora's disappearance, psychic detective Venus Dodge's vision of the missing Pandora is mixed with the classical myth of Venus's birth from the sea. When Venus Dodge associates water imagery with Pandora, there is a process of identification between Venus herself and Pandora. Water, however, far from being as pure as the sea, is a bloody river, signifying the curse that Pandora carries with her:

> Once there was a river of blood which flowed through the desert thick and still moving. No natural life inhabited the river or lived in its vicinity.[...] one night, limbs, structures, protuberances, began to grow upwards out of this blood. These forms came together in the shape of the body of a woman. Her body had the kind of beauty that is translucent and as she rose up out of the river it was as if she were made of glass. (pp. 69-70)

Venus Dodge's vision of Pandora's birth merges Biblical references to Eve's birth out of Adam's mutilation in *Genesis* and Venus's myth, underlying that Eve and Pandora both signify the same concept in different faiths. In Classical Greek and Christian myth, good and evil are closely tied together in the making of the angelic creature responsible for all the evils in the world. The ambiguities contained in Pandora's birth highlight the critical approach to the concept of creation and beauty epitomised by the relationship between Noah and Pandora. Far from being the loving creature he had imagined and worked on, Pandora clusters Noah's life with mysteries and enigmas, which ultimately destroy all his certainties.

The increasing sense of mystery and progressive crumbling of rational certainties constitute the second deconstructive movement. Throughout the novel rational certainties are progressively demolished. Several riddles concealed in Pandora's existence and her dysfunctional union with Noah articulate the epistemological crisis within the story. During their brief marriage, Pandora never utters a syllable. This questions the nature of the marriage itself: how does Pandora consent to be married to the surgeon? The answer is not found in the text, which leaves a suspended ambiguity over the nature of their

commitment. Although Pandora's silence allows Noah's unlimited decision-making power, the absence of communication becomes more and more sinister, as her stillness intensifies the mystery that permeates her existence. Their lack of verbal contact prevents Noah from exercising the power he would want to have over his creature that, by not speaking, has cut her existence out of his world. Already at an early stage of the story, Pandora appears to have reversed the power relationship established from the moment of her creation under Noah's scalpel. As Noah admits: 'His love for her had made him fragile, cut him open so his heart showed' (p. 27). Though passive, her resistance to being controlled is the first significant act of rebellion she performs against her unaware maker. His close observation of all of Pandora's activities, from her weaving a mysterious canvas to her strange collection of glass animals – an intertextual allusion to Tennessee Williams's disturbing play *The Glass Menagerie* – makes him only slightly more aware of the uncertainties hiding behind his relationship with Pandora:

> He became convinced that she too was made of glass, like the glass case, that he could see straight through her. Inside there was a part of herself she retained, she kept safe and to herself, which she would never let out, like one of the glass animals, that stood in the glass case and refracted the light. (p. 24)

Noah's early attraction towards his mysterious wife grows into impatient curiosity about her and all her unanswered questions. His discovery of her secret box and a series of seven letters for Pandora amplify her mystery. The letters, the first of which arrives on the day of their first anniversary, all bear the same enigmatic message: 'Do not be afraid of what you want' (p. 26). The subtly disturbing nature of the letters prefigures the climactic episode of the first section: Pandora's sudden disappearance. The mysterious atmosphere built up throughout the first section culminates in Pandora's alleged murder when, one night, Noah wakes up thinking that Pandora's breasts have been mutilated and she is lying next to him lifeless and covered in blood. When the police arrive to investigate the episode, however, it is revealed that Pandora's body is not in the house, a fact which insinuates doubts about the reliability of his perception, as

he himself admits: 'Of course there wasn't a body. It had been some kind of hallucination' (p. 32). Noah's realisation that Pandora has not been murdered but has simply disappeared is not entirely convincing as, from the very start, Noah's ability to distinguish between dream and reality has been already questioned. When Pandora first appears at his door, 'Noah was dreaming' (p. 3); later it is said that 'His work was his life and because he dreamt in a place similar to the hospital, his work seemed to be his dreams too' (p. 7).

Noah's unreliable point of view raises significant questions about Pandora. Does she really exist? And, if so, where has she gone? Throughout the second section of the novel, Noah becomes increasingly subject to hallucination, especially after his move to the city. Driven by his frenzied search for clues, he begins to doubt his own empirical beliefs: 'He had always been good at factual descriptions. He had trusted the facts of the empirical world which he had once inhabited with abandon. But now he began to suspect that the place where he lived looked like his new state of mind' (p. 42). His physical displacement reflects his mental state. No longer driven by the coherence of his rational mind, Noah follows his most irrational, uncontrolled instincts, such as his sudden urge to break into the white house opposite his lodgings. Here, after the discovery of a collection of glass animals identical to Pandora's menagerie, the ominous box and the photograph of a man, 'it was only then that Noah realised with absolute certainty whom he was looking at' (p. 49). Whoever is captured in the portrait, Thompson leaves it unsaid, suggesting several possibilities: has Noah identified Pandora's murderer? Or is Pandora's real identity revealed in the photograph? The notion that photographs were believed to steal one's soul, referred to on the previous page of the novel, certainly stresses that the second possibility could be true, that Noah has recognised in the man's portrait the image of a captured Pandora. The landscape of the surroundings endorses the general aura of deceptiveness and highlights Noah's hallucinatory state:

> Mirages were frequent, blue water stretching out for miles and Noah was convinced every time he saw one that it was real. He couldn't believe that he wasn't. [...] He found it strangely exhilarating the way

> the eye could deceive, the way one could see the world wrong and be absolutely convinced at the same time it was the truth. (p. 67)

Noah's reflections reveal his paradoxical state of mind. Factual and empirical knowledge can no longer rationalise events. While the validity of rational thinking is being deconstructed, Venus's psychic knowledge is equally challenged. When Noah asks her to help him find Pandora, Venus is reluctant to use her power and diminishes her ability when she admits, 'I've only got my visions and my dreams' (p. 66). Although dreams seem to be the only strategy left to disentangle the intricate mystery behind Pandora's murder, Venus Dodge's refusal to cooperate and her sinister refrain – 'He That Increaseth Knowledge, Increaseth Sorrow' – undermine also the power of non-rational cognitive strategies. As the story develops, Venus Dodge's dreams and visions develop a stronger influence on Noah's rational scepticism. Gradually, Noah's sceptical mind opens to accept the irrational element of the visions as the only way to find out the truth. The same, however, happens to Venus Dodge, whose 'psychic world had no room for the real' (p. 79), but starts to become increasingly more accepting of the reality that surrounds her. The third section opens at the significantly named 'Mirage Hotel'. Here, Venus Dodge starts to have clearer visions about Pandora, and her visions about the mystery seem to be coming to a conclusion. She also becomes more aware of herself. The process of Venus Dodge's acceptance of outer reality is stressed by her sudden awareness that 'The exterior and her interior world finally matched. She began to be aware of how her external appearance could cast spells too. The world began to have meaning for her' (p. 91). The coalescence of rational and irrational forms of knowledge and the progressive loss of faith in rationality are also conveyed by the scattered references to several myths, beliefs and superstitions in the text. The magic number seven – the series of letters addressed to Pandora, the 'seventh' night Lazarus takes Venus home with him (p.105) – and the number thirty-three – on 'the third evening, and a month after they arrived at the hotel' (p. 104) Venus sees Lazarus in the casino for the first

time – is possibly a reference to Jesus' age at the time of his death, and clearly a bad omen for future events.

The third deconstructive movement focuses on gender categorisation. Pandora's existence is wrapped up in sexual ambiguity from the moment Noah finds her non-gendered body at his door. Other clues to Pandora's ambiguous gender identity constitute a persistent motif through the story, and her gender ambivalence is interlinked with the process of rebirth she goes through which explains part of the mystery of her existence. The reference to the myth of the Phoenix in the novel epitomises both motifs. According to various sources of the myth,[16] the magic bird would live five hundred years and then would be reborn again after its death. In some versions of the myth, the bird would burn to death. Similarly, when Noah finds the glass nightingale assumed to be a present from Pandora, he burns it in the fire. Pandora herself has been rescued from the fire which simultaneously represents both her birth and her death. The Phoenix's ability to survive death hints to the possibility of Pandora's rebirth. Her rebirth, however, conceals more enigmas. When Noah goes to buy another glass bird as a wedding gift for Pandora, the shopkeeper remarks that he has sold an identical piece 'to a most peculiar man. At first I thought it was a woman. Very beautiful. In the classical way. But when I looked harder at the face, I could see that it was a man. The features seemed to dissolve in front of me, as he stood' (p. 23). The shopkeeper's statement increases the suspicions about Pandora's gender. Was Pandora originally a man, transformed into a woman by Noah's scalpel? Or is Pandora a figment of Noah's imagination? These questions remain open and keep reminding the reader of the ambiguity running through the text.

Another crucial episode during Noah's marriage suggests Pandora's sexual ambivalence. Pandora's secretive embroidery work reveals other disturbing details about her sexuality and gender:

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[16] Various authors talk about the myth of the Phoenix. Among the others, Herodotus (2.73), Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 15.392-407), Pliny (*Natural History*, 103-105) and Tacitus (*Annals*, 6.28).

> To his surprise, Pandora had covered it with a white sheet. Curious to see the work, Noah lifted up the sheet, and with his eyes followed the gentle fluid curves of the stitched woman, skin the colour of snow. But to his shock, he saw that Pandora had added on to the faceless woman's pubic area a huge phallus, surrounded by coarse, dark, pubic hair, each hair beautifully stitched, the tip of the erected penis stitched soft as red velvet (pp. 28-9).

The androgynous image is significant of Pandora's condition. Since Noah has given her a gender she does not identify with, similarly, Pandora's own creation manifests sexual ambiguity. As in the first section of the novel, gender ambivalence and androgyny continue to be a consistent theme of the second section of *Pandora's Box*. When Noah decides to kidnap Venus Dodge and force her to help him in his search for clues, he finally becomes aware of her female gender: 'Her naked body was curled up in a ball as pale and pink as a naked baby rat. He couldn't understand how he had ever been fooled into thinking such a puny body had ever belonged to a man' (p. 62). Noah's understanding of gender is linked with a notion of power. Whereas Venus's strong personality and firmness had fooled Noah into thinking that she was a man, later, when Venus is lying harmless and vulnerable and virtually at his mercy, her gender is undoubtedly defined as female. At the same time, Noah's change of opinion as to Venus's gender is again symptomatic of the unreliability of his point of view.

The third section of the novel, 'Lazarus' re-establishes the connections between the novel and the Bible. Lazarus, the man whom Jesus resuscitates from his deathbed, is associated to Pandora who has also been resuscitated, in a way, by Noah. The description of the venue where he encounters Lazarus is, again, strongly evocative of Biblical / Christian references. The club, which hosts a crowd of sexually ambiguous punters, is ironically named 'Keep the Faith'. To reinforce the statement the birth and crucifixion of Christ are re-enacted in what appears to be a blasphemous gender-reversal of religious icons:

> It was like a cave: the walls were dark and uneven and hewn as if out of rock. In the gloom Noah could make out small, brightly painted statues of the Virgin Mary and Christ on the Cross-set into inches around the room. [...] Black beards had been painted on to the stone

> faces of the Virgin Marys and the statues of Christ were wearing various doll-size sequinned dresses (p. 94).

The queer representations of Virgin Mary and Christ challenge fixed notions of gender. Is gender always relevant? Can gender always be identified? The questions remain suspended while Noah's vision of the bizarre arrangement and adornments of the Christian icons builds up the following piece of revelation. As he observes Lazarus dancing inside a cage, his attention is drawn to the perfect symmetry of his body. While watching the man he believes to be his wife's murderer, Noah, almost in a trance, has a vision of Pandora dancing superimposed on Lazarus's body. The strange combination of visions suggests the possible solution to the mystery of Pandora's disappearance: Pandora is Lazarus.

Originally a man, Pandora has been captured in a female body by Noah's desire and pursuit of beauty. After his experience at 'Keep the Faith', Noah's questioning of Venus receives her ambiguous answer: 'Sometimes I'm not so sure. What does being a woman mean?' (p. 102). A world of uncertainty and doubt is all that remains for Noah, who was sitting on the stronghold of his rational thoughts at the beginning of the story. The meeting with Lazarus is the climax of the three movements of deconstruction described above. Lazarus epitomises paradox: he embodies life and death, woman and man, the seen and the unseen. In its inexplicability, Lazarus is the paradoxical solution to Pandora's enigma. The description of Lazarus's house reinforces the ambiguous aura of the character. The only place in the dry city with water features, the extraordinary presence of this natural element in the desert, justifies Venus's perception that the place is like 'an oasis or a mirage, an atmosphere both transparent and full of instability' (p. 105). The enchanting atmosphere is emphasised by another reference to the Greek myth of the goddess Athena, whose birth out of Zeus's head is illustrated at the bottom of the pool. Furthermore, in the grotesque atmosphere of the house, which is crowded with bone sculptures, on a different visit, Noah can recognise a fountain with a statue of the goddess Pandora. The statue is the exact image of

his former wife. Reflections in the pool and fountains provide significant details about the house, whose external walls are also covered in mirrors. Lazarus bewitches every person he becomes acquainted with. And Venus, indeed, can feel herself changing from the moment she enters his territory, just by looking at her own reflection in the pool. Afterwards, Noah will notice, 'She was like a different person, as if she had been replaced by a double' (pp. 109-110). Noah, who has not seen Venus come back from Lazarus's house, appears to regress into his rational, one-sided attitude to reality: 'He felt all the anger that a scientist would if the information he had sent the satellite out for had failed to materialise. There had been an act of sabotage' (p. 107).

The encounter with Lazarus has created a fracture between Venus and Noah, who just beforehand was starting to surrender to feelings he had not experienced for any other woman after Pandora's disappearance. When he finally sees Venus again, she is much changed – 'she looked like an immaculate version of femininity' (p. 108) – and evokes Pandora's artificial beauty, perhaps hinting at the new ideas dawning in Noah's mind about beauty. Is beauty trustworthy? What is beauty? Is beauty worth pursuing? This phase signals a critical moment of self-reflection, culminating in his self-accusing questions: 'Do you think I could have done something like that? Murdered my own wife? Cut off her breasts? Mutilated her?' (p. 115) Behind these questions lurk Noah's deepest subconscious fears that he has murdered his wife, because, after all, it is his scalpel that performed the crucial transformation of her body. Lazarus, whose social status – just like Pandora's – does not officially exist, challenges Noah's quest for the truth. Making fun of Noah's name, Lazarus says it is 'like a shut-in flood' (p. 124). No certainties are left when Lazarus provocatively warns him that what makes him vulnerable is his imagination. Noah, who has not forgiven himself for falling into believing in Venus's magic, refuses the idea that he can be bewitched.

At the end of the section, all characters appear changed: Venus does not believe Noah any longer; Lazarus accentuates his chameleon-like nature to bewitch his victims; Noah is left with no solid rational beliefs. More importantly,

he has lost any complacent faith in magic, having been forcefully reminded of its unpredictable, destabilising capacities. 'Noah', the final section of the novel, represents the end of Noah's quest and a final reflection upon knowledge. Noah's doubts are further shaken by the detective's revelations that have proved Noah's innocence, because there is no evidence that Pandora ever existed in the first place. The few traces of blood found in Noah's house have not been identified with any existing human blood type. The notion that Pandora never existed or, if she did, was not a human being surfaces sinisterly in his thoughts: 'I'm not prepared to believe that' (p. 132). The mystery about Pandora's existence and her death is not to be found through empirical knowledge, as Venus points out to Noah: 'Don't you see, imagination, even if it leaves you vulnerable, as it did me, is the only way you will find out the truth?' (p. 138). Perhaps Noah's attitude towards imagination, and the irrational side of knowledge starts to change as he becomes, again, closer to Venus. Nursing her, he is looking after the only faculty he has been left with, imagination. The riddle about Pandora's disappearance has opened a vacuum in his ability to understand and to know, a gap he can only fill in with the solution of the mystery.

Pandora, Lazarus asserts, is Noah's creation, his dream forged from the fire of his own imagination. How could he, then, trust what was merely a product of his imagination? As Lazarus reveals: 'You forged her from fire. How can you expect loyalty from a phantom of your own imagination? Chimeras have needs of their own, take on a life of their own, wreak havoc if forced to tow the line' (p. 139). Victim of his own chimera, just like the nameless narrator of *Justine*, Noah does not fully understand Lazarus's enigmatic statement until later: 'Free from your definition of her. It's hard work being a goddess, god knows. Perhaps she wanted a change. A metamorphosis of some kind' (p.140). The word 'metamorphosis' implies transformation, a change into something different, and Pandora may have not disappeared, but merely taken a different shape. More clues to the solution of the riddle are provided by Noah's self-confessed obsession with Lazarus, a feeling bordering on the attraction he had felt for

Pandora. His obsession, identified by Venus with the devil's work, is cured through a magic ritual of exorcism. Noah appears to have completely abandoned his strong rational principles to welcome other kinds of belief. When Noah decides to take Lazarus's life, the murder is strongly evocative of Venus's visions of Pandora's body floating in a river of blood. The feelings of deja vu do not deter Noah who, afterwards, notices that Lazarus has disappeared leaving six-toed footprints behind. Pandora, it had been noted earlier in the novel, also had six toes. Moreover 'the prints of the feet began the size of a man's foot but as they progressed across the floor they grew smaller and narrower transforming gradually into the shape of a woman's feet' (pp. 145-146).

The identification of Pandora with Lazarus suggests several points. Pandora's genderless body has been forged into a female one by Noah's desire to create and possess beauty. Thompson, however, cleverly deconstructs the myth of beauty by having the beautiful creation turn against his (or her) own maker. Pandora's body, originally male, eventually returns to its male form, and Noah's quest has virtually destroyed all that he had faith in: power (epitomised by his creation of Pandora), rationality (represented by his faith in empirical knowledge) and beauty (signified in the aim of his professional career).

Thompson's Pandora brings together several myths and traditions originating from two different sources. Classical and Christian imagery and characters both contribute to the making of this enigmatic character. Created by Noah, who in the act of creation becomes God, she is herself originally a Greek Goddess. In Thompson's novel Pandora is a pagan Eve, the first woman and the carrier of evil and temptation to man. Since she pre-dates her creator, the paradox is clear: her creator could not have created her. This contradiction of rational consequence is a radical challenge to Noah's confidence. Ambiguities persist as Pandora is identified with perfect beauty and love, qualities traditionally attributed to the Greek goddess Venus, who, in a sense she also represents. Her ambivalence is developed further in her rebirth as Lazarus, another reference to the Christian parable. These myths are woven into

Thompson's complex text. If she is making use of tradition, she is refusing to operate within its boundaries.

Magic metamorphosis, the theme running through the story, is the most important way by which she deconstructs tradition and, like Pandora, defies 'category'. Knowledge becomes the object of Thompson's discourse through her critical use of traditions and myths. Rational knowledge and imagination both seem to be defeated at the end. If Noah has lost his faith in rationality, Venus does not have any more visions either. Despite the impossibility of explaining what has occurred to them, and the shadows from the past still hanging over the new chapter in their lives, 'the patches of light on the forest floor were something they both noticed now' (p. 148). Deprived of their respective epistemological systems (Noah's rational and Venus's psychic), the quest has brought them together to attempt, at least, to understand each other.

Both of Thompson's novels borrow archetypal characters, Justine and Pandora, from literary and mythological traditions, to articulate issues of narrative theory and political questions of gender. The choice of the two gorgon-like women subverts the systems of values, which Justine and Pandora *traditionally* embody: from the Sadeian character enslaved by her pursuit of her own virtue, Thompson's Justine is transformed into an ambiguous, strong, dangerous, independent woman, self-determined and wilful. Merging the two Sadeian characters, Justine and Juliette, into one enigmatic 'dangerous woman', Thompson challenges the dichotomy of traditional man-made female imagery, the angel and the monster. In her words: 'I wanted to undermine the virgin-whore archetype of the feminine. By making Justine and Juliette the same woman I was playing with that simple-minded dichotomy that takes place in literature from Adam and Eve onwards'.[17] Justine's success in escaping the prison that has caged her essence is mirrored in Pandora's metamorphic existence and ambivalent sexuality. Like Justine, Pandora's artificial beauty is the result of a male fantasy. It is Noah's desire which gives shape to his own dream. But can a male self be trapped in a female body? Thompson's idea that

[17] 'Interview with Alice Thompson', see Appendix.

'gender is an imposition' is a fascinating answer to Butler's theories of gender perfomativity, the 'relation of being implicated in that which one opposes', [18] and the feminist stance against gender binary categories. Both of Thompson's characters, paradoxically, refuse the engendered characterisation imposed on them by their new creators in the fictions which struggle to contain them. Justine and Pandora do not merely escape fixed characterisation, they are more than simply evasive characters, although their elusiveness is a key to the understanding of their meaning. Both are chimeras, creations of the male imagination and projections of male desire. Reminiscent of Cixous's 'Laughing Medusa', their enigmatic charms play with stylised representations of women in the patriarchal tradition incorporating myth and literature, to subvert them and undermine their semantic power.

With the same weapons used against them, Pandora and Justine invert roles with their male captors / creators, and both defy secure boundaries of epistemology and definition. In Thompson's fiction, the ambivalent metaphor of the *tabula rasa* brings together aspects of feminist self-determination and independence from conventional rules of authorship, with aspects of undefined character, unpredictable transformation, inexplicable purpose and drive. While *Justine* is a book of blank pages, and Pandora's box is empty: both characters remain memorable creations whose function retains a magical openness.

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[18] 'Interview with Alice Thompson', see Appendix. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (1993) in *Modern Literary Theory* (1989), ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, fourth edition (London: Arnold, 2001), pp. 247-251 (250).

Chapter Eight

Conclusions:

Why Magic?

Though we may feel ourselves to be very far removed from magic,
we are still very much bound up with it.

(From Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*)

Conclusions:
Why Magic?

The focal question of this thesis has pivoted around the manifestation of specific tropes and narrative structures gathered under the collective heading of 'magic', because of the absence of other satisfactory trans-generic definitions, rather than the desire to further pigeon-hole non-realistic fiction. The texts analysed in the six chapters dedicated to each author all share the common tropes and strategies defined in the introduction, even though individual texts may be ascribed to different genres – from the Gothic narratives of Tennant's *The Bad Sister* and *Two Women of London*, to the rewriting of Icelandic sagas in Elphinstone's *The Sea Road*, from Ali Smith's postmodernist ghost story in *Hotel World* to Celtic folk tale narratives in Hayton's *Trilogy* and Fell's *The Bad Box*.

The philosophical substratum underlying the poetics of the six selected authors is – as Alice Thompson suggests – 'the anarchical power of magic'.[1] Far from referring to an otherworldly concept, in its various manifestations, magic places the inexplicable mysteries deeply rooted in the contingent worlds of the narratives, in the foreground of the narrative investigation. Articulated through the four tropes – witches, doubles, ghosts and magical journeys – are ontological and epistemological questions, expressed through the paradoxical presence of magical motifs in this side of the world: the dangerous women of Hayton's *Trilogy* question the boundaries which separate Christian / rational / male and pagan / irrational / female interpretations of the human world; Smith's ghost explores the borderlines between life and death from the metaphysical limbo of afterlife in *Hotel World*; Elphinstone's travellers cross over the limits of known worlds, to confront the inexplicable otherness of unknown territories and their inhabitants in *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*.

The epistemological preoccupations stemming from the paradoxical coexistence of irrational and rational, invisible and manifest, physical and

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[1] 'Interview with Alice Thompson', Appendix.

metaphysical entities raise crucial issues of language in many of the texts. The ambiguous polyvalence of language, identified by Derrida's post-structuralist theories of deconstruction, is exemplified in the gradual annihilation of binary categories of differentiation in the present texts. The universal coherence of the linguistic sign is critically undermined by narrating voices and points of view – Sara's ghost and the other voices in Smith's *Hotel World*; the communities of Elphinstone's early novels; Thompson's narrator in *Justine* and Noah in *Pandora's Box* – who struggle to express their thoughts and communicate effectively. Significantly, although signifiers may lack semantic coherence in the dystopian communities of Elphinstone's *The Incomer* or *A Sparrow's Flight*, conversely in *The Sea Road* 'the best charms are words'; likewise, with the characters from *Hotel World* invested with a problematic inability to communicate, Smith's linguistic virtuoso wordplays re-empower words forgotten or neglected by her characters. The strength of language is therefore recuperated, with the acknowledgement of its unfathomable, endlessly ambivalent potential.

Within the philosophical questions raised by the strategic placing of the unknown, the uncanny and the inexplicable in the 'real' world, magic becomes, to borrow Fell's words, a 'way of exploring mysterious forces' which govern human existence in all its facets.[2] Political issues of gender assume a crucial relevance in the majority of these self-reflective narratives. The feminist discourse over gender boundaries, the problematic identification of 'difference' in women's writing, and the debatable need for labelling, categorising, inclusion and exclusion from the literary canon are reflected, for example, in the engendered narratives of Fell's *The Mistress of Lilliput* – importing feminised romance in the rewriting of Swift's satire – Tennant's transpositions of Hogg and Stevenson – concerned with the position of women in late twentieth-century Britain – and Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box* – both deconstructing the use of patriarchal stylised versions of female characters. The recurring trope of the dangerous woman, or the witch – as I have chosen to address her – embodies the complex ambiguities of man-made stereotyped female representations, repossessed by Cixous and Clément's *The Newly Born*

[2] 'Interview with Alison Fell', Appendix.

Woman, and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* at the end of the twentieth century; gorgons, sorceresses, mermaids and hysterics are only variegated manifestations of the one subversively dangerous woman – Justine / Juliette, Gudrid, Eliza Jekyll / Mrs Hyde – to recall a few symptomatic examples of the characters discussed earlier. Though feminist thinking has influenced the six authors in very different ways, their employment of the trope discloses universal similarities amongst each of them: whichever name or form she takes, the witch embodies the ineffable, unutterable, inexplicable Other, challenging, as Judith Butler would say, 'a stable notion of gender' and the binary structures applied to gender politics. [3]

The fascination with the paradoxical aspects of the 'real' world, the fusion of the extraordinary and the mundane, the Freudian marriage of the familiar and the unfamiliar in the 'uncanny' are traits which disclose a bond with a distinctively Scottish fantasy tradition. The supernatural topics of some traditional ballads – including 'Tam Lin' and 'Thomas the Rhymer' – the nineteenth-century Romantic reawakening of the Gothic genre – explored by diverse authors such as Walter Scott, James Hogg, Margaret Oliphant, and Robert Louis Stevenson – the early twentieth-century modernist experiments with fantastic fictions – exemplified by J. M. Barrie and Naomi Mitchison – and, finally, the postmodernist tributes to the persistence of magic in Scottish literature – manifested in some works by Muriel Spark, Alasdair Gray, Iain Banks, Ellen Galford and A.L. Kennedy – represent the long-lasting, deep-rooted trend of non-realistic writing in Scotland, across genres and literary periods. The treatment of supernatural topics in Scottish literary tradition, whether focussing on the philosophical investigation of metaphysical beliefs or the portrayal of the disturbing derangements of schizoid minds, always discloses a questioning movement. It is to this essentially critical quality of Scottish fantasy that the six selected authors contribute with their own narratives. The dangers embodied in the lingering feelings of Scottish nostalgia for a magical Celtic past are therefore overcome through the open attitude towards national identity expressed by the six authors in interviews and their work. Rather than looking backward, an organically flexible relationship towards

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[3] Butler 1990, p. 9.

the Scottish nation and its literary tradition is established in the reviewed context of a dynamic, dialectic concept of tradition, as suggested by Craig in the introduction, and the hierarchically-inverted prominence of marginal cultures against the hegemonic culture of Bhabha's theorisations of nation at the end of the twentieth century.

If the texts and the authors analysed in this study all attempt to defy categories and challenge definitions, what is the *raison d'être* behind *Re-Working the Magic*? As already discussed in the introduction, although boundaries must be flexible, they are nonetheless crucial in any critical study that holds nation, gender and genre as paradigms. Borderlines allow us multiple angles of understanding, from which we can approach the texts studied in this thesis in their full complexity. Simultaneously, their discussed relationships with past texts, established through the use of parody, pastiche and various forms of intertextuality reaffirms the presence of boundaries, even as it breaks them down. Throughout the texts, the need to subvert rules and break down preconceptions is a persistent factor. Only if the starting point is a *tabula rasa*, a metaphor often found in the texts, can something new begin. Magic is the primary tool through which transformations, subversion and radical changes can take place in the apparently rationally ordered worlds. It is fundamental to bear in mind that the most subversive power of magic stems from its *immanent* nature. The problematic and challenging nature of the texts relies on the fact that magic is not relegated to the parallel 'marvellous' dimension of the unseen, but in fact takes place in the palpable realm of the seen. Even when perceived through the oneiric projections of *The Bad Box* and *The Governors*, the borderlines between supernatural and rational worlds are thin. Magic reaches beyond the thresholds of rational thinking and overcomes the limits imposed by rational knowledge – a movement epitomised by Sara's ghost narrative performance in Smith's *Hotel World*; when empirical certainties fail to solve the enigmas of human existence, and have to be cast aside, magic suggests an alternative approach to knowledge, as non-rational cognitive strategies cease to be marginal tools of interpretation, as suggested by the rational / mythical dialectic in Hayton's *Trilogy*. The intuitive becomes vital. When empirical facts fail to explain the enigmas of the 'real' world, the imagination can stretch

beyond the limits of rationality and explore the mystery of human existence through dreams (Elphinstone's *An Apple from A Tree*, Fell's *The Bad Box*), hallucinations (Thompson's *Justine* and Tennant's *The Bad Sister*) – belief (Hayton's *Trilogy* and Elphinstone's *The Sea Road*) and psychic intuition (Thompson's *Pandora's Box* and Smith's *Hotel World*). Such non-rational investigative strategies and powers seem to emerge from a pre-linguistic hinterland, a world of forming or potential, that reminds us of how language *takes* shape and to remind ourselves that – as Elphinstone suggests – 'magic is usually done through words'.[4] This magical 'sensing' before or beyond words may be a language of a different kind, with which our six authors, in ranging degrees of self-conscious strategic deployment, have memorably engaged.

Even though epiphany might not always happen, imagination still offers the intrinsic optimum of curiosity, the human desire to wonder, to move beyond and to go further in understanding the world and its magic, as expressed in Kenneth White's lines:

> so
> there they go
> through the wind, the rain, the snow
>
> wild spirits
> knowing what they know
>
> (From 'Late August on the Coast')

[4] 'Interview with Margaret Elphinstone', Appendix.

Appendix

Interview with Margaret Elphinstone

Recorded in Glasgow, Bonham's,
Byres Road, on 5 June 2002

M.G. Could you start by telling me something about your upbringing? I know you were bought up in England and your family is Scottish. What was your childhood like?

M.E. I grew up in various places in England. I spent my first ten years in Kent and then in Sussex and Somerset. I came to Scotland in 1970 when I was twenty-one. I knew my father's family was Scottish. When I got to Edinburgh years later, everyone just looked like my Granny and talked like her! But I never really thought of it when I was young.

M.G. Did your Granny tell you any stories? Do you remember anything at all about your relationship with her?

M.E. Oh yes, loads of things. I mean, she used to tell stories. But when I was a child, being Scottish or English was not an issue. Nobody really talked about it. I think it has become much more of an issue than it was then.

M.G. So you decided to move to Scotland, was there any particular reason?

M.E. Yes. I was at Glasgow University briefly, a postgraduate. I had a baby and was married by then and we decided that we definitely wanted to be in Scotland. Initially, it was just a matter of which university we ended up at – but I have been here ever since.

M.G. Do you think the fact of being half-English and half-Scottish, so to say, has influenced your writing?

M.E. I think in childhood it was not an issue: it did not matter. I think that I had quite a romantic view of Scotland and of where people came

from. We used to come back for holidays, so I knew Edinburgh pretty well. It always seemed a place I wanted to be, but, as I say, I did not realise until a lot later in life what an issue it was to become. I think it has become a lot more of a political issue in recent years. There have been times when I have had to address it and times that I have felt quite resentful. I do not sit down to write because I am a Scottish woman writer, or not, as the case may be. I just write. I think that the debate about nationality is interesting but other people are concerned about my identity...I think.

M.G. Do you think that nation and nationality have some kind of input in the way you write, or, is it important at all when you are working in literature?

M.E. Yes, I think it is important, and it is a theme certainly in my latest book. I am dealing with nationality. I think that it should not be limiting. As soon as you define it, you limit it; all such definitions are reactionary, so I think you always have to say the boundaries are blurry and always fluid. Certainly with such things as national identity you cannot pin it down and when you start trying the results are terrifying. I read a lot of Scottish literature when I was young; nobody said it was Scottish. I read Stevenson and I even read a bit of Scott, though I found that very difficult, then. I was reading Scottish books and English books and I did not worry about which was which. I mean, you notice changes in setting, but a book by a Scottish writer does not have to be about Scotland. I have met with the question: 'How can you be a Scottish writer and you haven't got a Scottish accent?' I have never tried to become a Scottish woman writer, I am just me. Birth, setting, language are all clues to national identity in lots of narratives. That is fine. I just get wary of it when it becomes exclusive or rigid, because, per se, you are shutting people out and that could lead down the road of racism or fascism.

M.G. There was a big push earlier in the 70s and 80s to read and talk about Scottish literature. Generally, borders have become a trend, but now it is more like: Margaret Elphinstone has an English accent, but she is a Scottish writer; Bernard McLaverty is from Ireland, but lives in Glasgow, so he is a Scottish writer; Ellen Galford has an American accent, but she is a Scottish writer.

M.E. I am very pleased to see it that way. It has changed a lot. It's become a lot more deconstructive, and I welcome that.

M.G. Your novels and short stories often focus on the stranger in the community. Other times, in your short stories, there is an encounter with a character from a different world. What fascinates you in the interaction between the outsider and the community, the wanderer and the other. Are these two things somehow related?

M.E. I think they are. It was first pointed out to me by Alan McGillivray, when he interviewed me for *Laverock*. When he said that I focussed on outsiders, I had never noticed, and by that time I had written two or three novels. It was like a revelation, because I did not deliberately set out with that theme. But I have done it every time, every single time, so it obviously goes very deep. It's partly one's own experience, and it's partly one of those basic narratives that really interests me. When I look back to *The Incomer*, you get torn between the Naomi and the Emily figure, because I have seen both of them in most women. It's not an either/or. It's a bit like cutting one's own identity apart and making these two characters.

M.G. What about your short stories? For example in the collection, *An Apple From A Tree*, there are encounters with characters not quite from this world. Does that relate to the other theme of the outsider?

M.E. I think so. It's interesting to me how I've moved from fantasy to

history: to me they are all parallel worlds, whether it is the historical part (which obviously involves a great deal of research) or whether it's the fantastic future (which does not involve research). It's a world that relates to ours but isn't ours and obviously the reader and the writer are here in the present, and so read it from that perspective. And how does the fantasy creep in? I think I explored it most in Gudrid, in *The Sea Road*. I was trying to enter the mind of a woman who does not recognise our boundaries between the real and the supernatural. To her, there is no difference between reality and the ghosts, the supernatural beings and the historical events. I do not have much difficulty shifting that boundary. My belief is not the same as hers, but there is no hard and fast boundary between seen and unseen. To me it's a spectrum and I don't want to be the one to say at what point people are having delusions and at what point it stops being real.

M.G. Do you read other legends apart from Celtic and Scandinavian ones?

M.E. For the novel I am writing now I have been reading a lot about native American culture and that is really interesting to me because it's a whole other way of looking at the world.

M.G. North American or South American?

M.E. North American, the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes.

M.G. When is your novel out?

M.E. I haven't finished writing it yet. There is one out in a couple of weeks. But this one will be another year or so. *Hy Brasil* is nearly out now.

M.G. Historical and folk tradition, ballads: tradition is very important in your

writing. Do you have a definition of tradition in your mind? What is tradition for you?

M.E. I think tradition is the collective narrative of the culture and the history. Who are these people? It's the answer to that question, what makes any particular group of people themselves. I just invented that.... I don't know what it says in the dictionary!

M.G. I didn't expect a dictionary definition! Going back to your early novels, *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*, there seems to be a time reversal, the future age has actually gone backwards in many ways, for instance there are no texts. Why is that?

M.E. One of the things I found interesting about the reception of *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* was what that one reviewer described them as being set in 'an idyllic society'. I thought it would not be idyllic, it would be hell! I would hate to live in that world! You could not go to the cinema! There are things about it I think are more simple and we desperately need simplicity. But it surprised me that it should be seen as utopia, because it represents a past with the good and the bad and what that offers. What I was interested in was industrialisation. It's post-industrial and, in some respects, It's pre-industrial, too.

M.G. There is also a curse hanging over this society, the 'change'. In *A Sparrow's Flight*, characters are often talking about it. Something horrible has happened in this society. So it is not an idyllic place. They all live in fear...

M.E. ...And the place is littered with ruins. Yes, in that sense it is very bleak. I don't see it as pastoral or utopian, though there are elements of it. In the back of my mind was the self-sufficiency movement in the 70s and 80s. There is something in self-sufficiency and ecology,

but I would not think giving up everything in our urban life as Utopian.

M.G. When you talk about the absence of written material, obviously oral language becomes the primary form of expression. However, you seem to question the validity of oral language too. When you highlight the tension, for example, between the outsider trying to communicate with the community or between the two genders attempting to communicate. In *The Incomer*, after the rape, there is a complete lack of communication between the two. What are your thoughts about language?

M.E. I wrote *The Incomer* in 1987. It's a long time ago. I have always been interested in language and meaning and conversations that are at cross purposes. Look at law for example. Trying to establish facts seems to be absolutely impossible. I love detective stories, but one of the things that interests me is that in fact we will never know. If we both go away and report what happened here, there will be two stories. There is absolutely no getting back to here and now, find out what actually happened ... it's gone! Something happened... but it's subjective. I find that whole issue very interesting because it becomes important when people desperately want to communicate something. Most people know that feeling of desperately trying to make somebody else understand what they mean. As you get older you realise you won't.

M.G. Then you just give up!

M.E. I think language only goes so far, especially in the realms of feelings and points of view. You can never convey what is inside your head to anyone else, and you will never know what is inside theirs. Language is pretty tricky. I want to show how it lets you down.

M.G. Gender is another issue that often comes up in your work. My impression is that your characters aim at finding a better understanding based on reciprocal tolerance and acceptance between genders. What are your real thoughts about gender and the relationships between genders?

M.E. When I look back to *The Incomer*, it's probably changed a bit. It was fifteen years ago. A woman I met in Canada made a play out of *The Incomer*. I was very interested, but I was a bit surprised at what she had done with the gender role, as it seemed to be much more stereotypical than the novel. She foregrounded the relationship between Naomi and Emily. She made theirs a lesbian relationship and it all felt very predictable. The novel doesn't say this at all. I mean, you do not know. But I think since *The Incomer*, the men in my novels have become much more important. I have become much fonder of them, as a writer. I found Karlsefni, in *The Sea Road*, a very interesting character, and I am very attached to the men in *Hy Brasil*. In the novel I am writing now, I have a first person male narrator, so I 'have become' him.

M.G. You 'have become a man' for the first time?

M.E. For a novel. I have a male narrator in a short story, but this is a whole novel with a male narrator. So I have had to walk around being Mark. I think I have been moving that way. One of the things about *The Incomer* is that the women are very central and the men are grouped around the women. They are not necessarily hostile, but women are central and the men are around them. I think I have got much more interested in the man's point of view. With Gudrid and Karlsefni, he is totally central to her life, but not as central as she is in the novel.

M.G. I would like to talk about witchcraft and magic which appear to be so

important to your work. In *The Incomer* Naomi has a kind of bewitching aspect to her, she bewitches people, and in *A Sparrow's Flight* Thomas is a magician. Gudrid, in *The Sea Road*, is a skilled sorceress, though she embodies the tension between pagan and Christian beliefs. Are you interested in witchcraft and pagan beliefs, or other aspects of folk-tradition in Scotland and Northern Europe? What inspires you to write about magic?

M.E I think I have always been interested. I always read fairy stories and folk-tales and never had any problems with magic. It bothers me if it turns up in the wrong genre, and it would really bother me if I read a detective novel and there was a magical solution. But in the right genre I find it very interesting. I've always liked spooky stories.

M.G Is there any truth in magic?

M.E. Well, for example, when the ghosts at Sandnes come back in *The Sea Road*, they are not dead for Gudrid. They are still alive and haunting. When Karlsefni says 'I am not a priest, I can't exorcise them, but we can go to law about it', that is typical of him. He knows, although neither of them can express it in modern psychological terms, that he has got to get rid of those ghosts if he is going to save her. The relationship between the two of them is always going to be haunted until those ghosts are exorcised, so he does it. And she sees them go and I think it is an immense psychological exercise. It's also very spooky, or it's meant to be anyway. Think about the long Greenland winters and how people must have got on top of each other, and the howling wilderness outside and pitch dark and every one telling ghost stories... Once you had worked yourself up in to that state you would believe anything! So to that extent they are quite real. You can find a rational explanation: Thorstein the Black is in a catatonic state. It's all in the saga. But also, they are ready for walking dead, so they get them, you know – you believe and things

will happen.

M.G. What about your short stories? Like 'The Green Man' and 'An Apple from a Tree', how does magic work in our modern world?

M.E. I always look at real places and think of how they could be or have been. What would Byres Road be like if there were byres here? And where we are was moorland and Glasgow was over there? I think about things like that. It interests me. I notice if there is an old building and I think what was here before any of the rest of it... was it all fields?

M.G. So you use magic to look at things from a different point of view?

M.E. Yes, 'An Apple from a Tree' is Edinburgh, an uninhabited Edinburgh...

M.G. While we are talking about 'An Apple from a Tree', I would like to ask you a question about Nosila. To Alison, she is a double, and in Scottish literature there are plenty of doubles, generally evil ones. Isn't Nosila, instead, a refreshing change from the traditional evil twin?

M.E. She is a kind of Eve and she certainly bites the apple and look what happens: we land in Alison's world. I am very interested in the woman who is seen as evil because she is not part of the patriarchy, being ostracised and rejected as the Other. I think I am interested in those figures but Nosila is not evil. It's natural to wander around in a state of nature, but there are those who would say 'Oh my God ... a naked woman in Princes Street is an abomination!' So she is a threat.

M.G. Gudrid at one point says the best charms are words. In short stories,

too, you seem to place a lot of emphasis on the magic power of language. Do you believe language and magic have something in common?

M.E. Oh yes, words, charms. Magic is usually done through words. Words are intensely powerful. One myth that I have referred to a few times in my work is Adam naming the animals. God says 'give them names and have dominion over them'. Once something has been named or put into language, it becomes hard to escape what has been done. Someone once said to me 'you are a girl'. This is language and contains all the gender information which has nothing to do perhaps with being biologically female. Words are so powerful. They induct you into the system and once you are in the linguistic system you are one thing and not another. Your possibilities are limited and you are placed in an order. You might not like it, but if you fight against words, you have no language to do the fighting with – that is pretty difficult. Words are immensely powerful ... if you call that magic. Language and magic are both systems of signs and that is why they are very good images of one another. I use magic as an image of words because I think we are so obviously controlled by language, and yet where would we be without it? I am not advocating abandoning it, but I think we need to realise the implications of being part of that system. 'If it does not exist it is not real' – you can say that about magic, and yet look at the effect it has on our lives.

M.G. Where does your fascination with Iceland and the Northern countries come from?

M.E. Shetland. I lived in Shetland 1972–1980 and I worked in the Shetland library nearly all of those years. I was also a volunteer digger on a dig organised by St Andrews University. We were digging up a Viking farm which Barbara Crawford, who was running

the dig, thought was a royal farm. She found the documentary evidence in Copenhagen. She actually found the site from documents, so when we dug, there it was! She was right and it was very exciting! We were digging up this Viking farm and I was working in the library and looking after the Shetland collection and was reading the sagas and things. Shetland was a Norse country up until the fifteenth century and I began to get really interested in this history and *Islanders* grew out of that.

M.G. Were you inspired by any particular sagas for *The Sea Road*?

M.E. *The Sea Road* is based on 'Greenland Saga' and 'Eirik's Saga'. Gudrid is there. She is a character who is idealised in the sagas to a great extent. She does not have much of an inner life. I wanted to give her that. 'Eyrbyggia Saga', also: Bjorn comes from there. I was more influenced by 'Laxdaela Saga' which is about relationships, and features a lot of very strong, pretty alarming, Norse women. 'Njala Saga' has some very strong women, too. The 'incitress' is a figure in the Icelandic saga who incites men usually to deeds of vengeance. Because these figures of women who appear in the sagas live in a very male, very violent culture, I was very interested in them.

M.G. Going onto another set of beliefs and popular culture, can you tell me something about your choice to adopt Tarot imagery?

M.E. There are themes borrowed from T.S. Eliot in *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight*. My original plan with those novels was to write a quartet and what we have so far is Winter and Spring, there was going to be a Summer and Autumn, to follow the Eliot theme. The characters find the book, the *Four Quartets*, in the first one and I quote from it. It was going to keep reappearing, but I never wrote Summer and Autumn. I had also become interested in reading about

the Tarot. Images like that do not reflect reality, but they are like looking in a mirror: you can make decisions in relation to the image you see, and you can respond to it. I am not into fortune-telling or horoscopes, but I think in all of these there are images which can speak to you. They are ancient images: very colourful and very ritualistic.

M.G. Did you read Jessie Weston's book?

M.E. Yes, *From Ritual to Romance*? I read it when I was an undergraduate.

M.G. I have been rereading it after *A Sparrow's Flight* because I came across a Tarot text that covered a comparison between the Fool and Parsifal.

M.E. Oh, how interesting! I would not have thought of it but I did read her at a very impressionable time in my life. I was very interested in the Matter of Britain, the Arthurian legends. We studied them in at my English language course, we read *Beowulf*, and lots of Anglo-Saxon. I found the language side of it quite hard, but I got thoroughly interested in it. When you read *Hy Brasil* you will find that *The Waste Land* has cropped up again, and the Grail, and a few other images like that.

M.G. What about names? You said in the past that your Green Man is Tam Lin. What about Thomas from *A Sparrow's Flight*: is he Thomas The Rhymer?

M.E. A bit, yes. I choose names carefully and I think that is in there, certainly. We are in the Borders.

M.G. And what about Naomi? Any particular references there?

M.E. Not that I remember, and yet it was very important to me, I can't remember choosing her name now.

M.G. I read an article by Lucie Armitt and she said that Naomi's name suggested that she was a nomad .....

M.E. Old Testament, I suppose. Naomi is the mother-in-law of Ruth isn't she? I would have known that, as I was brought up knowing all those stories, but I don't think I thought about it.

M.G. The first two novels refer to a mysterious past. In particular, in *A Sparrow's Flight*, there are references to 'the change', a kind of nuclear catastrophe: there is radioactivity and genetic consequences. Can you tell me something about your environmental concerns?

M.E. During those years when I wrote *The Incomer* and *A Sparrow's Flight* I lived in Galloway, forty miles from Sellafield and I was very involved in the peace movement at that time. Those were the days of Greenham Common, and I used to go down to Greenham. One of my very early short stories, 'Her Odyssey', was autobiographical, based on issues at Greenham. During those years in Galloway I got very involved in environmental issues. I was disturbed by our nuclear policy and certainly 'The Cold Well' and 'Conditions of Employment' originated from there. I went with a friend to Sellafield. It was creepy. I had an idea for the story and knew I couldn't do the story until I had done the tour.

M.G. So is the environmental issue still alive?

M.E. Either I have changed, or the world has changed. I am not as deeply involved, though I go to Faslane occasionally. But at that time it felt very much more in the forefront of things, and I think that my stories

reflected that.

M.G. You have also written books about gardening?

M.E. I do not do that any more as I do not have a garden any more, only window boxes. I was writing the first gardening book at the same time as *The Incomer* and I think it shows; quite a lot of the gardening book has crept in. I was doing a reading in Orkney when *The Incomer* came out, and someone in the audience said: 'you really describe very well how to make a compost heap' and then asked a question that I could answer about making a compost heap. It was meant to be a discussion about fiction! I am aware that it crept in there.

M.G. You mentioned the Bible. In *The Incomer* there are descriptions of the environmental changes in terms of a lost Eden, and there are passages paraphrasing St John's Gospel. Less so, but equally evocative of *Genesis* is the merchant's punishment in 'Spinning the Green'. Were these references in the back of your mind?

M.E. I think there are always Biblical references in my mind, because in the school I went to we studied Old Testament and New Testament every week, and I had to go to church every Sunday at home. I know the Bible quite well and it creeps into things. In the book I am writing now, for the first time, I have tackled it head on, in that my first person narrator knows his Bible extremely well and quotes from it on purpose.

M.G. Is he a priest?

M.E. No, he's not a priest. But it's the first time I made a first person narrator into an overtly religious character, and I think it is quite ironised from within. There are other references in *Hy Brasil*: one of

my main characters is an atheist, who took the scripture prize at school, ten years running, so he knows his Bible and I think there are quite a lot of other references. I find it really helpful to be able to refer to it. I am sure it has affected my prose hugely. If you grow up hearing the King James version week after week, it infects you. I'm not talking about the content, I'm talking about the rhythm. So it is definitely there.

M.G. Talking about the Scottish literary tradition, to what extent is fantasy a part of it?

M.E. It's supposed to be one of the fundamentals of Scottish literature and there is an element of truth in that, fantasy does crop up. The difficulty is that it pops up in a lot of other places too, and sometimes Scottish critics have written that Scots invented Magical Realism, well they didn't! On the other hand, when you look back at people like Hogg, some of the stories in Scott, the whole folk-tale and ballad tradition, it's flourishing and it stays alive. One of the interesting things is that element of continuity, certainly in the folk-singing tradition. There is continuity in folk tradition, but you don't have that sort of revival aspect, which goes with the English folk tradition, because it has been alive all along. I think folk tales have been alive and well right through Scottish literature and still surface in it.

M.G. Do you have any theories about fantasy in general? Why do people write fantasy?

M.E. I don't know why a lot of people write it. One reason for writing it is that what we call real is very limiting and the genre of Contemporary Realism can be, too. If you only go by what is actually proven, there is nothing in this room but this table ... we can see it, feel it, look at it, hold it, and all the rest of it... and maybe there are a million angels dancing between here and that thing! Well, maybe there aren't. We

don't know. I think the genre of Contemporary Realism has sometimes seemed quite narrow. There are great psychological novels and they can go in different directions. Henry James wrote amazing psychological novels. That tradition has continued for people who really find ways of looking in people's heads. The modernist novels did it. Postmodernism played with reality in different ways. People are always pushing against the boundaries of the novel form because it is never quite enough. Contemporary Realism, i.e. mid nineteenth century, was amazing, in some respects: it said things that had never been said before, about social conditions, life, relationships, it was all very radical. But then, every time you build a box you have to jump out of it, don't you? It's one way of subverting that paradigm of reality ... every time it gets limiting, you have got to subvert it. Postmodern writing has done that in lots and lots of ways, but fantasy remains a very useful tool to do it. Postmodernism and Fantasy are very closely aligned.

M.G. Often fantasy has been a subversive force. Fairy-tales, for example, can be subversive.

M.E. Certainly the Gothic novel interests me very much. It's a way of talking about passion, anger, sexuality. Some of them are so poignant. Radcliffe, one hundred years before Freud, seemed to know all his models. She found a way to express what could not be said directly.

M.G. Does gender make a difference in a writer?

M.E. I think gender makes a difference, but I am not sure about women's writing. I teach women's writing and I think it is very important that feminist criticism has developed over the years. But in the world of fiction women can be men, men can be women, you can all be who you like! I would hesitate to say now that women's fantasy does one

thing and men's fantasy doesn't. I have seen too much simplistic criticism where they say that all men's writing is unfair to women, or something and I think NO! Gender yes, but the sex of the author, while it obviously affects your mindset, does not have to limit you. You can't say, for example, that only women's writing attacks subversive issues.

M.G. How do you find the contemporary use of magic in Scottish literature? Would you call it Magic Realism or would you define in it in a different way?

M.E. I think a lot of contemporary fantasy is set in the real world and some of mine is too. There is less of the inventing a whole world. In *Hy Brasil* I have invented an island and put a real world in it, so it has almost turned it around to become Contemporary Realism. Except that the island is imaginary, it's fantasy and based on all the fantasy, islands I have ever read about.

M.G. Have you ever thought about writing for children?

M.E. I have, but I've never done it. I think it's partly an external marketing decision. Children's literature is a different market place, a different publishing world. I have not had any ideas because I have not been looking in that direction, and I think that I have found my space. I write novels for adults which a lot of older children seem to enjoy.

M.G. Did you ever make up fairy tales for your own daughters?

M.E. Yes, I told my children stories.

M.G. Would you tell me something more about your forthcoming novel, *Hy Brasil*?

M.E. It is set on an island in the middle of the Atlantic that is not there. It is

based on all the mythical islands to the West that appear in Greek, Irish, all sorts of literature. It has a thriller type of plot, but I have given it a history. Again I have a young woman protagonist who is an outsider, and she has been sent to write a guidebook.... Now read on!

M.G. Any thoughts on the other one you are writing at the moment...

M.E. ...That is set in Canada and the States in 1812, during the war between Canada and North America. It is a world of war, and I think that interested me because the whole of the known western world was at war, the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, the wars in America and so forth and we live in a very war-torn world. My main character is a pacifist and he gets caught up in this war... It's a bit different.

M.G. Thank you!

M.E. No, thank you!

Interview with Alison Fell

Recorded in London, Newton Green,
On 18 November 2002

M.G. You were brought up in Scotland and you moved to England. Could you tell me something about your childhood/upbringing?

A.F. I was born at the end of the war in Dumfries, my mother was staying with her parents in Lochmaben, a small town nearby. When I was about three, we moved to Hamilton, near Glasgow. That was a very dark, post-war, poverty stricken town, as I remember. It inspired parts of *The Bad Box*. Then, after my dad was sacked from the garage for 'Bolshiness' or 'Communism', we moved to a small village in the Highlands, Kinloch Rannoch where I learned to read in a tiny school room by a waterfall. I will always remember that. I remember the exact moment of putting together C-A-T, symbols with sounds, what that meant and what a word was like. Eureka! After that there was no stopping me, because I think that is the first time I felt powerful, leaving this awful, dark, powerless, poverty-stricken...Oh God! I can't describe it... then going to these wonderful mountains and space to run about, and this wonderful discovery of writing and reading. I really did feel powerful. After a few years because of a family death in the Borders we had to move back to Lochmaben which was a big trauma for me. In fact I was put on anti-depressants by the family doctor when I was only about twelve! Can you imagine? So obviously I was so attached to the mountains and then I fell into this bad space. I had to cope with a new school, kids who spoke with a different accent. Then I went to Lochmaben Academy and did very well because that was one way of getting over a certain kind of depression. Thinking was always very exciting, being stimulated and working hard and shining... beating boys! Then I went on to Dumfries Academy and after that it was either English at university or Art. I just knew that if I studied English literature I would spoil something, I would stop something, because I only liked writing. So I chose to pursue the art side, which at least meant that I was producing.

M.G. In terms of fine art, what did you study?

A.F. Everything in the first years. It was very craft-based, then I ended up in the sculpture school, which was again very craft-based. There was no conceptual art around then, I can tell you! I can carve you a gravestone with Roman lettering. They really trained us, that was great, I adored it. I worked twelve hours a day. I adored drawing from the model. Then I got a post-diploma scholarship, which I did not take up because I was pregnant. But I did take the travelling scholarship, hitch-hiking around small cathedrals in Burgundy. Then my husband got a job at Leeds Art College, and we moved there and that is how I moved from Scotland to England.

M.G. How do you feel about living in England? Some critics have defined/grouped you among 'Anglo-Scots' writers. How do you feel about this definition? What do you think about nation/nationality? How does that make an impact on the world of a writer, if it does at all?

A.F. Well my formative years, until I was twenty-three, after all, were shaped by being exposed to all the forces and the conflicts that are in Scotland. There is no way one can ever get away from that when you write, because writing comes from so deep. You are not really in charge of it. This term 'Anglo-Scot' is completely foreign, really stupid, especially for me. 'Anglo-Scot' to me is a sort of Scottish 'aristo-kid' who was sent to English public schools, a sloan-ranger. I had a very different relationship to Scotland. The whole nation-issue verges on xenophobia. I have had times where editors have interrogated me: 'When did you leave Scotland? Were your parents Scottish?' And I want to say: 'Look I am 1000% Scottish! Just look at me!' What is this? What is this cultural nationalism? I think it is really nonsense. It is just marketing, the focus on the Scottish voice, Scottish idioms... just because I am Scottish. I don't care where you

were born or brought up. You should be able to write from whatever perspective you want about anything. I think the imagination knows no country. People are always looking for categories, labels. It is just a lot of nonsense, whether it is academia doing the labelling, or marketing people. I can't stand the feeling that anyone would limit me so that I couldn't, for instance, write the Japanese book, *The Pillow Boy of the Lady Onogoro*, or *The Mistress of Lilliput*, because they belong to a different tradition of writing. I would feel so claustrophobic if I felt I always had to stick to the Scottish idiom. That is one reason why I left Scotland. It was something claustrophobic in its culture as opposed to the wide, open landscapes. That is why I could not go back and live there, no matter how good it might be for my 'career'. I couldn't do it.

M.G. You mentioned the influence of the Scottish landscape in *The Bad Box*. When you wrote *The Bad Box* you also included a supernatural narrative, the Hind Girl's story. Was that in any way influenced by Celtic tales or legends that you may have heard or read when you were in the Highlands?

A.F. Well I do remember one old book of Scottish myths and legends... but I think a lot of it just came rather naturally from living in and learning to write in that exact environment. It was not a conscious decision at all. I could very easily spend my whole life writing books which would be published for children, Scottish/Celtic fantasy. It just sort of pours out of me. That is not all I want to do, but that will always be a strand.

M.G. Do you think Scottish literature and the supernatural are somehow connected?

A.F. I do not know if the supernatural belongs to Scottish literature, but mysticism, pantheism, landscape have certainly a strong influence.

Poetry in Gaelic language is very deeply rooted in landscape imagery and a kind of mysticism.

M.G. There is conflict between the Highlands and the Lowlands in *The Bad Box*, and several other divisions and fragmentations. It is almost as if the whole novel is run by duality and dichotomies. Do you feel that this is a part of Scotland? Or of your experience of Scotland?

A.F. It is, yes, it is for me in my life. Leaving the Highlands and having to come to the Borders was a bad thing. The conflict between Lowlands versus Highlands actually works itself out in different ways: claustrophobia versus openness, restriction versus worship, fear and guilt versus passion. I think the average Scottish personality is extremely unstably knit together from opposing forces: guilt, Calvinism, romanticism, moralism. I do tend to thump on about that and I note that not so many other Scottish writers do so. Perhaps the ones that live there don't seem to notice it so much. Things have obviously changed since I left. I am still living out some kind of lock that was Scotland when I was growing up there.

M.G. Your stories often express the conflicts, the feelings of entrapment, and the dilemmas of your women characters, as in *The Bad Box*, *Mer de Glace* and *Every Move You Make*...

A.F. They are not easy characters. I am often not constructing a character. I'm piecing in a lot of layers and trying to explore through these characters; the dilemmas that are important to me. Conflicts are part of women in this time, though, honestly, I actually cannot bear positive feminist heroines. I think it has been a problem for my publishers, they are never quite sure how to market my work. It's always very ambivalent. I will try and write a light book but it is still dark, I am not in charge of that really. You write what you write, follow your inspiration. I am not sitting at my desk thinking 'I am

going to construct this particular sort of character'.

M.G. You mentioned feminism, how much do you think gender is an issue in your narratives?

A.F. Yes, It is. My writing originates from very deep conflicts. If there is a difficult thing in life I will home in on it. With my women characters I find myself writing about pressures or things I feel they are taboo, not to be spoken of. I really have much more fun writing some of my men characters, sometimes it feels like a rest cure, because I am not taking on quite so much. I am interested in men and I suppose I was quite a boyish little person when I was young. To be a woman does seem to be awfully conflictual.

M.G. You were saying the Scottish identity is often dictated by marketing and that is a forced pigeon-holing. Do you feel the same about gender and authors? Would you call yourself a 'woman author' or just an 'author'?

A.F. I would call myself a Scottish writer, not always, but often. I do not call myself a feminist writer! Then you are pigeon-holing and some of the marketing or publishing people push it to that level.

M.G. In criticism is it fair to put women writers and men writers in different compartments?

A.F. I don't know, I'm not sure. The forces of sexism are still operating. After a kind of flowering of women's writing and women reviewing, there is a black-sliding towards where the boys, especially the English boys, are romping across all the review pages. Women are getting pushed aside, unless they fit in to genre-things, like very established people such as A. S. Byatt, or 'chick-lit' type of novels. I sometimes think it's fair enough to take women as a special case,

though I would not have said that a few years ago. I do not like what's going on – if women do not fight to maintain a position, they get shoved back effortlessly by all sorts of forces. It's very complicated, but I think it is fair enough to do a PhD on these themes.

M.G. I am positively discriminating... filling in a gap of what has not been written.

A.F. Yes, you are trying to explore any of the things that might link women writers with Scottishness.

M.G. But I also think that women authors should be included in the 'official guide to Scottish literature'. Why should they have to be in a separate book? Are they not part of the history of Scottish literature?

A.F. Yes. Certainly in the books that I have received on Scottish literature and poetry, there still have not been that many women... it is a bit odd and disappointing!

M.G. When you wrote *The Mistress of Lilliput*, were you deliberately writing a parody of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*?

A.F. It's not a parody, it's a pastiche. A pastiche is a definite literary form, the stylistic imitation in a different historical era.

M.G. How did you come up with that idea?

A.F. I don't know. At the time I was trying to write a very dire and difficult, very personal book which I have just finished and will be published in March. I could not write it at that point because I was still too close to the events. I was speaking a lot of time in the Reading Room at the British Museum and I found myself one day getting up, going to the

open shelves and picking up *Gulliver's Travels*, the old unabridged version that I hadn't ever read. I did not know at that point why I was doing that. I read it and I was enchanted by it. He is so vicious and dirty minded, like... Billy Connolly! Then I noticed that poor Mary Gulliver only got two lines in the book, and they were pretty horrible ones, too. Then I thought: 'would it not be beautiful to just start off from the point where Gulliver comes back?' I just winged it from there and thought 'Let's make Mary Scottish!' Then I did lots of research about the eighteenth century and I wrote quite a lot... and it got so boring it got to be this cold feminist story... So I realised I had to narrate it from the point of view of the doll. She could be both the omniscient narrator and she could say all sort of things about Scottish women and their dolls... She could say the most scandalous things which I wanted to say, *because* she was at the bottom of the heap in terms of the kind of the hierarchy of oppression beloved by idiot 'identity' politics. It was my swipe at a lot of things. Once I decided on that, I could undermine the character of Mary, I could concoct a totally envious, bitchy, schizoid narration and I could discover how to go all the places I wanted her to go. But, mainly, I could let out not just a lot of my schizoid dreadful nature, my Scottish nature, but also my ambivalence about femininity. She is literally a *neuter*, she can sense sexuality, she can fantasise, but cannot do it... I got a lot of fun out of exploring that.

M.G. And you also introduced romance into Mary Gulliver's world ...

A.F. When I knew she was going to meet Gulliver finally, after pursuing him across the South Sea, I realised that she would have come through so much and also explored her sexuality. So he was never going to be any good for her, he was too frigid. She deserved a really 'fruity' man. I really needed her to have love, a leading man, a hero of some kind. I did not know who it was going to be and then I woke up one morning having dreamt of a strawberry, I lay there in

bed, thinking 'who bred the first table strawberry? I bet it happened at exactly that time in the eighteenth century because a lot of that was going on'. So, I went off to the British Library and key-worded strawberry on the computer and I found myself going through ancient dictionaries and biographies. Then the name 'Duchesne' came up and I looked it up and finally came across this guy, Antoine Duchesne. There was one book of his in the North library which was *Histoire Naturelle Des Fraises* and there is the whole story, though it doesn't happen in the South Seas. I plucked him out of history and he developed into a character. It's funny how it came through a dream and then this conviction that this was the way to go. He had to be a delicious earthy man, a sexy French naturalist.

M.G. The idea of the doll narrating the story also gives the narrative a very original twist. It suddenly imposes on the reader the suspension of disbelief. What are your feelings about the mixture of genres, mixing realism and fantasy?

A.F. Well, in the *Travels* one could not accuse Swift of being a realist. So it is within that type of mode. I think Swift would have approved of my narration as a kind of subversive scheme to explore and say contentious things. I am not very comfortable with realism. I feel that I can do it and I have certainly done it to a certain extent in this latest book, *Tricks of the Light*, just to keep the reader in the narrative, make the events feel real. But when I try to write in a realistic kind of mode, my pen often freezes up...

M.G. ... does the genre become too narrow?

A.F. I think I am much happier when I can do an omniscient narration and just go anywhere. Like in *Lady Onogoro*. We do not really know who is narrating it. There is speculation about it in the preface, but it's a narrative that can go anywhere, in and out of various

characters, and can suddenly take the point of view of a lizard, or a horse or whatever. I feel happier with that. There is something about my mind that feels trapped, that wants to be elsewhere than where it is in a realistic narrative.

M.G. There are loads of things that we cannot comprehend, merely looking at them from our own rational point of view. These things need to have a space in a narrative and if you do not use a more imaginative type of writing you cannot allow room for them...

A.F. ... Or you cannot *get* to them, you cannot express them. I often feel I am like the tip of the iceberg, the little bit above the surface that operates in the world. So much of what goes on day-to-day is almost inexpressible or so subtle. There is not a lot of writers are coming to grips with that. I sometimes look to people like Don De Lillo...have you read his novella *The Body Artist*? It's bliss, even though it's difficult. He is so alert to these feelings of many, many layers of experience of a person, the body in a room... That kind of work speaks to me far more than many books that are more realist, that one can enjoy, admire and romp through quite quickly, but... that really do not seem to be as accurate to experience, or give me as much pleasure. I guess being a poet means that you want the mysteries to be addressed, and if you do not get them you feel you have not had a proper meal... you have had something that is good, but not enough!

M.G. How do you express mysteries as a writer? How do you face the mystery you can't understand? What do you think the way is to express them?

A.F. Different strategies every time. I am always looking for the right form, the voice, or the right layers or places to express some of these things. Sometimes I find them, other times I don't. I am still working

towards that. But in poetry it is different. A poem is a smaller thing and so you can plunge in without knowing where you are going and the poem will gradually take you to its heart, as it were. I feel surer in a poem. You are not really bothered about characters or the other things that come into play in novels. A poem to me is a spacious little space. Even though it looks small, it has many possibilities. It is huge. A short story makes me despair because it is such a natty little neat thing. I am not really happy with it unless it is a prose poem or something. I obviously do have a problem of categories.

I have just finished typing up this project that I have been working on for about three years on and off, which is something I was inspired to do by reading some poems by a contemporary Swedish poet, Lennart Sjögren. He wrote this short sequence, it was called *Six October Poems*. They are rural, almost subjectless, quite abstract and absolutely rooted in the landscape... I thought 'Oh God, this is what I always really wanted to do!'... because I write mainly outdoors. When I am doing poems I have to start outside, whatever the weather. I wanted to do six poems per month throughout the whole year and track some of the mysterious things that happen to me in connection with the seasons, the weather and the landscape.

So that was my way of exploring mysterious forces, whether it speaks to anyone else, I have no idea, it feels very personal. I looked upon it as my hobby quite frankly all that time because I was writing *Tricks of the Light* at the same time. I am very glad I made the space to do it because I always feel that when I have done it, I really have got at some of these mysterious things. That's what it is, or that's how it feels, that's why it is mysterious. You can't always do that in a novel because you are dealing with bigger and broader structures, surfaces, characters...

M.G. What are you working on at the moment?

A.F. I've just finished this difficult book which took almost five years – a

desperate book – which is half-fiction and slightly gothic and slightly Faustian – *Tricks of the Light*. It's very autobiographical, too, talking about death and traumatic things, which I needed to write about, to try and deal with. Also, I wanted to explode a few stereotypes about middle-aged women, Anita Brookner's sort of dreadfully deadly heroines, and to write about middle-aged passion and middle-aged people behaving unsuitably. I also wanted to write about advertising. The novel has a slightly Mephistophelian advertising executive. It's all set in the Alps, in a fictional Alpine place. The main character, Broom is a painter, she is an artist and she has a Scottish background. She is in the Alps dragging all her Scottish baggage of morality, as well as memories of bereavement, and Micky Flint is a Lebanese advertising account manager scouting for extreme-climbing female talent for leisurewear promotion. There's quite a strong mix of conflicting elements in *Tricks of the Light*!

M.G. Thank you!

A.F. Thank you!

Interview with Sian Hayton

Recorded in Dumfries,
Gracefield Arts Centre,
on 5 February 2003

M.G. Could you tell me something about your background and upbringing?

S.H. I was born in Liverpool. My mother was from a Scottish background, her grandfather was a Gaelic speaker from Mull and her grandmother was Welsh speaking from Wales. Her mother was manic-depressive and my mother was very cyclothymiac. It's difficult to explain, but if your parents are depressed, you're constantly on the periphery, and you can't go away because that'll depress them, but you can't go too close because they are too depressed to be nice to you. It's arbitrary because your first moral duty is to be happy, because if you are happy, you can help other people and be sympathetic and compassionate but if you are not, then you are closed in on yourself and you can't extend your own boundaries. That was very important.

My father was from Cumberland, his mother was originally from Germany of Jewish ancestry. My father was very pleased with his Jewish ancestry. He admired people like Jacob Bronovsky and had a long correspondence with him when he was a student, after the war. He also met Victor Gollancz before the war, when they were running a sort of underground shelter to save Jewish intellectuals from Germany. My father had great ambitions to become an academic, but unfortunately, he started before the war. He got a scholarship to go to Oxford, but he couldn't go because the war was starting... that was September 1939. So he was always a discontented academic and I think he would have been in pink heaven if I could have been an academic... but I ran out patience!

By the time I'd finished my masters degree I had had enough.

M.G. Where did you study?

S.H. Glasgow University. I studied education. I thought then, as I think now, that education needed a lot of improving. It's absolutely

essential for getting a developed civilisation throughout the world.

M.G. Did you move to Glasgow when you were an undergraduate?

S.H. No, I moved to Glasgow because of my father. He worked in the civil service. We lived all over the places in the north of England, and then we came up to Scotland when I was ten. We lived out in the country, in Bishopton in Renfrewshire. All my secondary education was in Paisley. It was a bit of a blow, because I could have been in West Yorkshire, which had a very go-ahead approach to education. When I came to Scotland, their approach to education was still resting on a reputation for producing great academics, which certainly has been. However, by that time it was a step away from the rest of the world...

M.G. Have you ever thought about the impact of nation and nationality on your own personal experience? You have Welsh, Scottish and English background. What do you consider yourself to be?

S.H. I think I'm European, or North British, if you want to narrow it to a smaller geographical area. In the last book of the *Trilogy* I'm trying to make this point all the way through, because even as early as the tenth century, Europe was on the move, and people were changing countries and changing nationalities, swapping cultural backgrounds. It's just absurd to talk about nation as a fixed concept. It's been growing in the last three hundred years. If you'd to go back to eighth century Britain, and you were to say 'this is England', people would say 'no', because there would have been Scandinavians coming in, Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Northern Vikings...

M.G. So do you think the issue of nationality is not relevant when discussing literature?

S.H. I don't think so. I can see my writing going into lots of trouble... with Scots who are pounding the Scottish cultural drum...But I really don't think it's to the point. Unless you want to admit that you have a big chip on your shoulder, which a lot of Scots have. You find the best minds in Scotland usually had to get out of Scotland to accomplish anything, because the subculture is designed to get you down, for being different. It irritates me when the Scots are dribbling on how Scotland was a conquered nation. If anybody has been ripping off the Scots, it's their fellow Scots.

M.G. When did you start to write?

S.H. After my father died, in 1982. I don't know why, it's that kind of feeling you get when one of your parents dies. You think 'I'm next on line, so I'd better do something!' I got married young and had three children fairly quickly. That was very educational, though I got to my late twenties and I thought 'I don't know anything about people, really'. So I went out and got a job in a bar. It was very good for me, I had lingered in the groves of academia for far too long.

M.G. Was this in Glasgow?

S.H. Yes. That was my real education started, at high speed. The habitual customers were university students most of the week, but at the week-ends it was mostly prostitutes, drug addicts... the prostitutes used to work in Kelvingrove Park. Getting to know them was good for me. Some of them started to like me as well, because I picked one of the pimps up and bounced him off the wall! I don't like people who bully people and he was knocking around this girl who was half of his size. So I was known as the 'Big Yin' and whenever there was a fight 'Big Yin' was called... so they were quite good years, really good years!

By that time I had divorced my husband and my family... I kept in

touch with my daughters, I was living just down the road from them. We were still a family unit, but I needed more freedom and I couldn't find it inside the family. My new husband started to get pretensions to gentility and went to college, the girls were already at college, so I thought they didn't need me to be in the city any more. So I'm off. Then I re-married, and by that time my father had died and I was beginning to develop a career as a writer, so I thought that being out in the country I would be more productive. We had a big house and we had my mother move in with us. It worked all right for a couple of years, but then my mother's dementia started and I had another divorce...I have now re-married and I'm living in a great situation. I've developed arthritis, but it hasn't stopped me from typing, so... I carry on! I finished a book in December, it's been a long journey.

M.G. There are several Celtic themes, characters and influences in your writing both in the *Trilogy* and in *The Governors*. When did your interest in Celtic culture start?

S.H. That goes right back to when I was young. We used to have family gatherings every Saturday night and that was when the Celtic thing would come out because the Scots in exile are... worse than the Scots at home! So, we heard the stories out... I heard them many times. But there's something about good stories, you don't mind hearing them time and again. Even if you know how they are going to end, you enjoy them anyway. So I used to spend the evenings curled up in the settee, listening to them singing and telling stories, hoping that they wouldn't notice me and send me up to bed. It was kind of 'Celtic Twilighty' and there was lots of whisky going around, too.

It's impossible to say when it started, because it's never not been there. To write about Scottish Celtic culture, it's not something that you do self-consciously. It's either joined to you or, otherwise it's always going to be a transplant, it's always going to be obvious and

you're always going to look at that to make sure it's there. But if you keep pulling a plant up to look at its roots, it will die.
Beside, the Scottish culture is very diverse. There's urban culture, rural culture, Highlands culture, East coast, West Coast... there's an enormous diversity. To talk about 'one' Scottish culture is entirely beside the point.

M.G. In the *Trilogy* you refer to some of the stories from the *Mabinogion*, I'm thinking in particular of 'Culhuch and Olwen'...

S.H. My mother's oldest sister married a Welshman, a native Welsh speaker. Again, the way they used to entertain each other was by exchanging stories. These are the stories they used to tell me. I'd heard all these stories and then somebody gave me a book of Grimm's fairy tales, the Jacob's collection and the Penguin edition of the *Mabinogion*. It was fascinating to read all those stories because I could remember they were the stories I used to listen to when I was a kid. It was a revelation.

M.G. So you adopted many of the names of your characters from the *Mabinogion*...

S.H. Yes.

M.G. And you are very familiar with other Celtic folktales, for example 'The Battle of the Birds'...

S.H. Yes, that's an Irish folktale originally. 'The Battle of the Birds' seems to belong to the 'q' Gaelic group. The whole idea is that the boys were sent off for fostering at the age of seven, in the same way as today they would be sent to prep school. It was a good idea to send your heirs away, because otherwise if they were sitting at home they might become rebellious and have you killed or sent away in exile to

Iona, which was one of the things that kings did when they got too old. Iona was kind of retirement home for ageing Celtic kings!

M.G. The relationship between genders is quite complex both in the *Trilogy* and in *The Governors*. In the *Trilogy* you have the autarchic father and the daughter who eventually rebel and then you have the monks who again represent another patriarchal order. What are your thoughts on gender?

S.H. Although I was brought-up by my mother to be independent, despite what people might expect from me because of my gender, I was never a feminist really. When feminism started, it was the symptom of something that was already happening, not a prime mover. It was a symptom of a change rather than the producer of change.
The problem is that there's an awful lot of gender bias which never gets the attention that it should have. Women are fighting all the time when they are trying to be equal. The truth is that women are still not equal to men. But what you really need is both a woman's perspective and a man's perspective. Women think in a different way from men. There's nothing wrong in that. It's saying that women think worse than men that's wrong. It's only recently that we have been trying to articulate what is that makes women different and what female strengths are in particular.

M.G. How are this issues reflected in your work? The giant's daughters rebel and manage to escape away from his fortress...

S.H. That's a symbolist approach to the issue. The fortress is the safe institution, whichever you might want to think of. However, when I wrote *Cells of Knowledge*, I was trying to re-present fairy stories, which are an ancient articulation of an ongoing situation. I was trying to get back to the basics, as it were. This is what people think, but what if that story had a different ending? What if a woman realises

that actually leaving her husband is an advantage and she can explore things and live her own life?
I love fairy stories, I always will. Any story has got a mythological or fairy story element to it. Jane Austen re-writes *Cinderella* many times. The Brontë sisters rewrite *Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast*, that's definitely *Jane Eyre*... but you can find bits of fairy stories in any book.

M.G. In your novels, the Christian monks try to suppress and defeat the supernatural powers represented by Usbathaden and his daughters...

S.H. Oh yes. They have to, because they see themselves as the representatives of what they think is the only form of legitimated supernatural power. That's only normal, but what they can't see is that they are trying to replace one system of beliefs with another one. People always think that what they say is the abiding truth.

M.G. There is also an issue of control, if you have the authority, if you are the representative of the only supernatural power, then you are in a position of power...

S.H. Yes. Of course.

M.G. Folk tales are also very much part of *The Governors*. There's a selkie subplot running through the main narrative...

S.H. Yes. That's another great fairy tale topic, which conceals gender issues. It's about what happens to a woman, when she surrenders herself to marriage, that she in fact loses a lot when she gets married.

M.G. Do you see the female selkie's loss of her skin as a metaphor, then?

S.H. Yes, it's a metaphor for losing your freedom and identity. They say that marriage is compromise, but it isn't really. Most of the time, it's sacrifice on the woman's part.

M.G. Was that behind Hester's story?

S.H. Yes, it's swallowed up in the story. She is fortunate because she has post-partum psychosis, which means that she gets to wander into the dark tunnels of the soul, as it were, and she can explore what her marriage is doing to her, what her gender and what the horrors of being a woman are. There are lots of horrible parts in what she sees.

M.G. Although it's a traumatic process, In a way when she starts having these visions, she becomes her original self, she becomes 'Hesione' again...

S.H. Yes. She becomes the great daughter of Laomedon again!

M.G. All your novels have a kind of deliberately fragmented narrative structure. Both in the *Trilogy* and in *The Governors* you use glosses or different narrators. Is that one more way of expressing the complexity of the worlds you are describing?

S.H. Yes, I suppose it is. I find that I need keep changing voices. There was a deliberate pattern to it. The first book has only one narrator, the second book has three and the third has five. Because that was something that Celts did when they were developing a story, they would use patterns, numerical patterns too. I kept this one quite simple, but if you read the Arthurian cycle, that is very complicated. Most of that would be laughed by the twentieth-century reader, but at the time of the Arthurian cycle it would have been recognised and admired by the auditors. Also, I think it was a way of remembering the story, because there was nothing written down, so if you could

remember the numerical pattern, that would help you remember the story, too.

M.G. In *The Governors* you have mysterious first-person narrator, who kind of follows Hesione's story as a spectator...

S.H. That's part of Hester's schizophrenic personality, of the disintegration she is going through. This mysterious character follows her and comments on her behaviour, and she is fortunate that it's also got a sense of humour, so that's more fun for the reader, I hope. That's a Sam Spade background character...

M.G. Have you always had a strong interest in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical theories?

S.H. Yes. That goes back to my father, again, because he was an adamant Freudian. He went to university as a mature student after the war, because there were lots of grants then for mature students. When I was young, Freud's books were lying about in the shelves. So, I started reading those and then I found that I didn't really agree with him, because he is an... archetypal male! So then I discovered Jung and I thought that's more like it.

M.G. Yes, the notion of the collective unconscious seems to be at the back of Hesione's story. She empathises with the destiny of the selkie, she identifies with a myth that's been part of the Celtic collective unconscious.

S.H. Yes, that's certainly true. The most trivial things about herself certainly become re-identified as part of that person.

M.G. I thought Jung was also a great influence in the *Trilogy*. For example, you work on the myth of the cave, when Kigva goes to the

cave at the beginning of *Hidden Daughters*...

S.H. That's another representation of the collective unconscious. Kigva means 'bright day'. She is impersonating the sun goddess. At one point, the sun deity was female. When Kigva goes to the cave she is encountering night. When she comes out, it's to resume her role but great cultural changes have occurred. It's all breaking up and she doesn't have anybody who can explain to her what's happened. Her three assistants have also lost touch with reality. Kigva doesn't understand that her culture is breaking up and doesn't know what she is doing. She is looking for something bigger than herself and that's why she attacks the giant, because she wants to see him defending himself.

M.G. Are there any deliberate references to the *Koran* in the *Trilogy*? I was thinking in particular of the myth of the seven sleepers...

S.H. Yes. I was reading the *Koran* at the time. I couldn't obviously make a study of it. But I was very interested in the historical and mythological side of it, like the story of the seven sleepers. There are echoes of it in every culture. In the last book of the *Trilogy*, *The Last Flight*, Merthun comes from Asia minor, his background is from there. His father and grandfather were presumably traded with the Vikings.

M.G. What about the mysterious 'woodman' in the last book of the *Trilogy*, *The Last Flight*?

S.H. That's another archetype, and it's actually Merthun transformed.

M.G. The 'woodman' is also another reference to Islam, because the wood man talks about Hallah...

S.H. Islam was real for Merthun, because his mother would have talked to

him about it, when he was very young. His mother was also part of the trading agreement.

M.G. In the *Trilogy* there is a fascination with the coexistence of Christian and non Christian religions...

S.H. Hopefully, it proves religious tolerance is possible. If you study history, you discover that religions have existed side by side. People have been able to belong to different religions. There is a terrible absolutism that's developed, and it got narrower and narrower, winding up with Protestantism, where there is absolutely no questioning, God is just one great monolith. The same happens, to same extent, with Islam. They can't afford to let anybody else come in and dilute the power base. In the good old days, in tribal society when people used to live in smaller communities than they do nowadays, people were much more tolerant. We have to accept that this is probably going to disintegrate totally, in which case we will go back to the tribal model again.

M.G. Religion and myth play a strong role in all your fiction. Going back to *The Governors*, you are also influenced by Greek myth, when you give your character the name of 'Hesione'...

S.H. In our story nights, Greek myth sometimes was part of it too. I remember reciting the myth of Herakles and his labours and they all dozed off!

M.G. And how do Barbara Robertson's illustrations fit in the text?

S.H. You would have to ask the illustrator! It was the publisher's idea. They started off with the idea of employing author and illustrator at the same time. They sent me a copy of their version of Naomi Mitchison's *The Oath-Takers*. I didn't have a strong idea of what the

pictorial aspect of novel had to be. I'm not like Alasdair Gray, who does his own illustrations for his own books. The book that I have just finished and the one that I have started now both have multiple narratives. It's very important that visual clues should be there, to make sure that the readers know that it is a different narrative.

M.G. What you have been working on since the publication of *The Last Flight* in 1993?

S.H. I wrote two plays. I wrote *Mirthful Mournings on the Death of Eslpeth McEwan* in 1996-1997. It's the story of the last woman who burnt as a witch in this region. It was performed in Kirkcudbright in 1998. Then I wrote *The Last Dream of St. Cuthbert* in 2000. St. Cuthbert is the patron saint of Kirkcudbright Neither of the plays have been published.

M.G. And, finally, can you tell me something about the book you've just finished?

S.H. Yes. It's set in the sixteenth century in Kirkcudbright. It's about a man who had been part of the international circuit of scholars, although he is not a doctor of the university himself, but he's employed as an intelligence by Lord Burleigh, Queen Elizabeth's secretary.

M.G. Is he the main character?

S.H. Yes, he is the main character. He becomes embroiled at the time the massacre of St. Bartholomew in France, which everybody always remembers as perhaps the worst massacre of the Catholic Church. It must have been very spectacular, because it was in the walled city and it must have been hell. Most of it is about this man's passion and loss of faith and eventually rebuilding it, not on any kind of basis of

religion or scholarship, but he just starts from scratch on his own. And that's about it, but... you'll have to read the book!

M.G. I certainly will! Thank you.

S.H. Thank you!

An email interview

With Ali Smith

Smith's reply
reached my mailbox on
7 September 2000

M.G. How did you start writing?

A.S. I just did. It was something I knew I was good at and should do. In fact had to do. In fact had no choice but to do. As Flannery O' Connor said, when someone asked her 'why do you write: 'because I'm good at it.' She wasn't being immodest, she was just knowing and admitting what she was here for. We're all good at something. The hard thing is finding what it is, then finding, making, being made by it to make, the space in our lives to do it.

M.G. You have published collections of short stories and novels. What makes you decide to write one or the other?

A.S. I don't. If I'm working on a novel then everything goes into the novel. If I'm working on stories then everything is story-sized. There's a bit of outside pressure, i.e. publishers always want writers to write novels. They are determined that short stories don't sell because people don't buy them. The reason people don't buy them is - not enough money is provided by publishers to writers to write them, or to booksellers to be able to sell them properly.

M.G. Your short stories are often anticlimactic or simply seem to end in the middle. Can you say more about your short story technique?

A.S. I disagree. My short stories end at their natural ends. Sometimes the end of things is the beginning, sometimes it's the middle, and sometimes it's the end. I am interested in the relationship between openness and closure, sure. But all my stories end where the end is for them.

M.G. Alan Jamieson once pointed out at a conference how in a short story what you leave out is more important than what you put in. In your short stories, as well as in the novels, there is always a great deal of

mystery, of things left unsaid. Is this a deliberate choice to leave something open for the readers to interpret?

A.S. In everything that's written – everything good, and not just short stories, but everything – there's something left unsaid. The finding and experiencing of the unsaid thing is the reader's job. Whatever's said implies what's not said. It can't not imply it.

M.G. A certain degree of your work carries autobiographical elements...

A.S. How do you know? Are you sure?

M.G. How much do your personal experiences influence your creative work?

A.S. God knows. I tend to think none. I've never been dead, homeless, a worker on reception, a rich stupid journalist or a bereaved adolescent, to take *Hotel World* for instance. Of course our lives are part of our work, and other people's lives, and that's why the patron god of writers is Mercury, the god of eloquence, the arts, communication and - thievery. But as soon as it's written down it has become impersonal - entered the space that is no longer mine, or only yours.

M.G. Where else do you get your inspiration?

A.S. I do not want to even consider this question. What if I knew where it came from and because I did it stopped coming?

M.G. To what extent do you think some of your work could be called 'fantastic'? Do you have a specific genre in mind when you write?

A.S. No genre in mind. No choice about what gets written. I'm not

abdicating responsibility, I'm just allowing for it to have its own life, which if it hasn't then it won't work, breathe, be alive for other people who read it.

M.G. Language is a recurring issue in your work...

A. S. That's because it's made of language. All books are.

M.G. In 'The World With Love', the character is fascinated with the sensual sound of French words, through which she begins to become more aware of her sexuality...

A.S. i.e. otherness, other possibilities of communicating?

M.G. In *Like* Amy's temporary inability to read hints at her refusal to accept a part of her life, or an altogether different attitude towards language (which one?)...

A.S. You tell me.

M.G. In the second chapter of *Hotel World* a homeless person discovers alternative ways of speaking...

A.S. To Else it's not an alternative, it's all she's left with of language. She can't, isn't capable of, using it like other people, who have full power over it. For her, language has changed, words are emptied and different from other people's, even words leave her homeless, broken.

M.G. What's your point of view about language?

A.S. It's a wonderful thing.

M.G. And on communication?

A.S. It's also a wonderful thing!

M.G. Love, death, ghosts from the past often haunt your fiction. Sometimes it is real ghosts, sometimes objects belonging to a past they have witnessed, other times the past simply seems to creep back into the characters' lives. What makes you choose to give space to these supernatural themes in your narratives? In what way do you see love and death often linked to each other?

A.S. I don't choose to give space to anything in my fiction. If it's the story I'm writing then it's the story I'm writing, that's just all there is to it. And of course love and death are linked, from the French notion of orgasmic small death through the metaphysical poets all the way to something Winterson sums up in the perfect opening sentence, in *Written on the Body*: 'Why is the measure of love loss?'

M.G. Your characters often wonder about, are obsessed by or are unable to understand Time. Has the concept of Time lost its meaning or is it simply subject to relativity? How is this reflected in the structure of your narratives (I am thinking especially of *Hotel World*)?

A.S. Novels are always about clocks, they're always in one way or another about the chronological, from *Tristram Shandy* (all avoidance and digression away from the ticking of the clock) onwards.

M.G. In a previous interview you have stated 'your imagination doesn't have a homeland'. Yet, Scotland and Scottish themes sometimes come back in your works. How does your Scottishness affect your writing?

A.S. No idea. these aren't questions I can answer. You'll have to tell me. All I know is I'm Scottish and I write. So of course there's an interconnection. I'm a lot of other things too, like brown-haired and nearly 40 and right-handed and lapsed Catholic and gay and snub nosed and rather bad at cooking and where do you want to stop? What do you want to use? What's relevant? I'm not choosing. I'm suggesting that relevance is always relative.

M.G. Do you feel any affinity between your work and contemporary Scottish writing?

A.S. I am friends with all contemporary Scottish writing. It's a great time for it. I'm friends with a great deal of other writing from all over the world too.

M.G. Which (Scottish and non) authors have had an influence on your work?

A.S. No idea. You'll have to sleuth this out for yourself, accepting that everything I've ever read has had an influence, can't not have.

M.G. Do you think gender issues are relevant in the discussion of your work?

A.S. Probably.

M.G. What do you think of gender and literature debates in general?

A.S. Excellent, the more the better, so long as there's a coffee break and nobody gets too antsy.

M.G. If you could choose, in which section would you have your works displayed in a bookshop ('Fiction'; 'Scottish Literature'; 'Gay and

Lesbian Literature'; other)?

A.S. All of the above, and as many others as possible too.

Interview with Alice Thompson

Recorded in Edinburgh, George Hotel,
George Street, on 12 November 2002

M.G. Could you tell me something about your upbringing?

A. T. It was an academic upbringing. My father was an academic professor in economics and my mother used to be a teacher. So... we were surrounded by books and conversations would always be quite argumentative and analytical, with lots of debate. I learnt how to read at a very early age. Once I discovered the world of books I became very involved in them and I was also quite ill with asthma as a child, so I spent a lot of time in bed reading and reading books became my alternative world. So it was a happy childhood, I spent a lot of time in the countryside: as well as living in Edinburgh, my parents had a cottage in the Highlands and I spent a lot of time running around and being a bit of a tomboy really. It was a mixture of natural beauty and the world of books.

M.G. Do you think notions of nationality and nation are relevant to your writing?

A.T. I am undoubtedly influenced by my Scottishness in myriad ways, but there are other just as powerful influences on my writing; the main one being other writers whose nationality is various. Nationhood is relevant to literature – and to some writers more than others – but it is always in the context of the plurality of life. That is the strength of good literature: its complexity and resistance to parochialism.

M.G. What did you like to read when you were young?

A.T. Anything and everything. I loved the classics like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Wind in the Willows*. I tended to love imaginative writing and a lot of children's writing tends to be imaginative. I also liked Enid Blyton's adventure stories, I loved stories that had strong plots. Then, in my early teens, I became interested in detective writing, Erle Stanley Gardner, Raymond Chandler...I devoured all of

Agatha Christie and then of course I went on to the classics: Jane Austen, Melville, George Eliot...

M.G. Do you think the genre of crime fiction has had some influence in your writing? There're always mysteries, riddles, plots to be solved...

A.T. Definitely. Crime writing is the backbone to all novels: it's a plot made bare. I like the purity of crime writing, the plot is what drives it forward. The reading of a great novel is in some way an act of detection.

M.G. But at the end mysteries are solved in crime novels whereas in your novels they are not...

A.T. Well, I suppose you could argue that I am interested in the mystery of life and that is ultimately unsolvable. You do get resolution in writers like Agatha Christie or Erle Stanley Gardner, whereas my novels play with the idea of revelation.

M.G. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write?

A.T. I don't. Like James Joyce, I write for the ideal reader. I like the people who read my books to be attentive and open-minded and to enjoy being surprised. That would be my ideal reader: someone who doesn't want things confirmed but wants things disturbed.

M.G. Somebody who doesn't have preconceptions?

A.T. Preconceptions about either what is good writing or what is bad writing. Were I to compare British writing with American writing I would say US writers are slightly more willing to take risks. I think in Britain we are still hide-bound by the nineteenth century with the archetypal way to write and I really want to opt for a different way of

writing.

M.G. When did you start writing? When did you first publish something?

A.T. I started writing when I was very young. I was about six or seven years old when I started writing stories. Then I went on to write some short stories at Oxford University, but I did not try and get them published. Then I while I was studying for my PhD, *Justine* was published in 1996.

M.G. You wrote a novel and a PhD thesis at the same time?

A.T. ... Don't tell my supervisor!

M.G. You must have had a double!

A.T. That would have been useful... A rather straightforward trajectory followed. *Pandora's Box* was published a number of years later and then *Pharos* a couple of years after that.

M.G. Let's go back to Justine. There are obvious references to Sade's novels, *Justine* and *Juliette*, how did that idea start? Did you want to re-write Sade's stories?

A.T. That is the thorniest question, really, because I think you are asking how an idea comes about to write a book. My experience of creativity is very much a synthesis of ideas coming together. I had a central theme which I wanted to explore that was that of sexual obsession and I suppose one is immediately drawn to De Sade – He is the prime mover in that respect. So I thought it would have been interesting to explore ways in which women are objectified via this man's single-minded obsession for a painting, for an image, a dislocation takes place between the image and the reality of the

woman. I used De Sade to look at the power of sexual obsession, but also look at the sexual objectification of woman.

M.G. The main difference between Sade's novels and yours is that in your novel Justine and Juliette are one person or two faces to the same woman, whereas Sade divides the woman into two characters: one is the cunning, deceiving, beautiful girl (Juliette) and the other is the pure, virtuous, also beautiful girl (Justine). In your novel the two opposite characters almost seem interchangeable...

A.T. I wanted to undermine the virgin-whore archetype of the feminine. By making Justine and Juliette the same woman I was playing with that simple-minded dichotomy that takes place in literature from Adam and Eve onwards.

M.G. Your female characters are all complex creatures and they puzzle readers as well as the male characters that work around them. They are an enigma all the way through...

A.T. Justine is a 'tabula rasa'. This enabled the narrator's reading of her to conflict with the ironic subtext of the book: her manipulation of him. With *Pandora's Box* I was looking at how Pandora is a blank upon which Noah creates his own perfect image. I am very interested in enigma. I spend most of my life in a state of enigma.

M.G. In the last novel, *Pharos*, Lucia is another enigmatic creature...

A.T. She has no memory, she has no identity. In the end it becomes apparent that she is a ghost. I suppose in a way it is almost a metaphor for my own creativity, my own search to give meaning... I am always starting from a blank page. So, I think often my female characters are formed as I write.

M.G. Are they a metaphor for writing?

A.T. Some of them are. However, others take on a life of their own. I think Venus has her own needs and desires. Some of my characters are more passive, where other female characters are more defined and more specific. So in *Pandora's Box* Venus plays an active role and in *Pharos* Lucia takes revenge towards the end.

M.G. Talking about Venus, there are many references to Greek myth in *Pandora's Box*. Myth sits very close to Christianity and both are very much present in the novel. The iconography is very mixed and the boundaries between myth and religion almost cease to be relevant, because the two coexist even if with conflict... Can you tell me something about the role played by myth and religion in your novel?

A.T. I am interested in the meanings and symbolism that mankind brings to bear on his world. Myth and religion are two ways to explain this world. There are explanations for emotions and drive and spiritual explanations for why we are here. Myth and religion seem to me to give the same explanation in a way. They are both created by us to give shape and story to our own world so it's quite straightforward there... one is the continuum of the other and the two often collide or coexist quite happily in my writing. My writing itself uses symbolism as a way of explaining the world. I am not so interested in explanation as in symbolism, which is what both myth and religion do. So I am very happy to explore the world of spirituality, because literature is a way of giving a symbolic meaning to our world.

M.G. The other thing that comes to my mind when you mention Venus is the idea of trans-genderedness that is already suggested in *Justine* but becomes more prominent in *Pandora's Box* doesn't it?

A.T. In *Pandora's Box* I was exploring what it is to be female, what it is to

be male, looking at how gender is an imposition and really playing with the idea of shifting gender as we shift identity. Identity is very tenuous and so is gender in many ways... So my characters in *Pandora's Box* tend to shift sex because I wanted to look at how gender is man-made rather than God-given.

M.G. This is what Noah does, he imposes the female gender on Pandora's body...

A.T. Exactly. The body is not defined as female or male but Noah chooses to call her a woman. Then he superimposes the image of an ideal woman upon her. But, of course, that's impossible. She will have her own will and the fact that she is reborn as Lazarus illustrates how a construction or a boundary that is set around a human being can collapse. There will be conflict between basic human will and a construction of society.

M.G. That ties in with the gender issue, also very central in *Justine*. There is gender swapping and social roles are inverted. Justine is both trapper and trapped and so is the narrator. He feels he is pursuing or chasing somebody, but maybe he is being chased. So gender roles are not fixed...

A.T. Again, I was playing with De Sade who had very fixed ideas: the male protagonist is the controller and the woman the passive victim. I inverted that relationship.

M.G. In *Justine* there are also other traditions you refer to. There are veiled references to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and generally the tradition of the double in Scottish literature. Did you have that in mind when you wrote *Justine*?

A.T. There are deliberate allusions to James Hogg, Oscar Wilde and

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper. Justine* is rich with allusions: it was an attempt to make the book quite dense, luxuriant... I wanted the texture of the writing to be thick with meaning and different layers.

M.G. Speaking of tradition. How would you define tradition? What is tradition for you?

A.T. In literature, many of the books I have read formed a path leading to my own work. So I would immediately think of the classics, Emily Brontë, Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, Melville, Hawthorne... Those to me are the authors that I have read that have set me on the path of writing.

M.G. What about other traditions? Are myth, philosophy and religion an influence on your writing?

A.T. Yes, very much. I would say that definitely the Greek myth has had an influence on my work. I studied Classics at school and I read Greek and Latin. I just loved the world of gods and the pagan world of the *Metamorphoses* and that way of representing emotion via symbolism. I just think it is such a pure way of looking at the world and very powerful, it's how we dream. We dream in symbols. Even our consciousness via language works on the level of symbolism. I think to take the world literally would make the world a poorer place.

M.G. Would you say that of realism?

A.T. There is room for realism, recognition and confirmation. Realism can also deal with some social issues more effectively. My own propensity is towards more imaginative forms of fiction... People like Angela Carter rather than.... Jane Austen, although I do happen to love Jane Austen, too. But my own gravitational pull would be

towards magical realism rather than towards straightforward realism.

M.G. Would you describe your writing as magical realist?

A.T. I think writers always find it difficult to pigeon-hole their own writing. There is something in a label that makes writers instinctively nervous. I think it is because writing is so much about eroding labels and testing labels that we find it difficult to put labels on our own work. I would say yes, but I am also interested in playing with logic and creating alternative worlds. I think Magic Realism does have a slight connotation of fantasy... unleashed, if you like. Whereas I feel that my magic does have social connections, it's not completely arbitrary. The magic in my books is throwing light on the conditions of our own contemporary world in the same way as J. G. Ballard's science fiction is a wonderful commentary on modern society. So my magic is, as James put it, 'a balloon being tethered to a world of reality'. That was his description of fiction and that's how I feel about my own work. There is always something tethering it to reality.

M.G. Magic does take place in the real world, however it is also problematic. It throws light on reality but it also causes problems, like Pandora's transformation into Lazarus questions rationality...

A.T. That's why I like magic so much. I like the anarchical power of magic. At the same time as saying my magic has social relevance, I like its disturbing, unpredictable quality. So I am a great one for having my cake and eating it, in my writing! In a way that's what life is about, we have our story, our history, and we are also confronted with the essential mystery of life. We try to make sense of our world but life is also fundamentally a riddle. That to me is an authentic experience of life, that combination of bewilderment and story.

M.G. The mixture of fantasy and realism is very Scottish. To what extent

do you think the Scottish literary tradition is influenced by fantasy?

A.T. I think it's very strong, from James Hogg to Alasdair Gray and A.L. Kennedy... I think it is stronger in Scotland than it is in England. I don't know whether it's because of the landscape; it's wild and unfathomable. English landscape is neat, less dramatic and has a smaller perspective. We certainly have a stronger tradition of magic in our writing. From the folk-tales of the selkies onwards, there has always been that background in Scottish literature, based on magical happenings.

M.G. Yes, that might go back to the Celtic belief system. Not much has been proved, but apparently their Otherworld was not separated from this world, but was an immanent part of this world. This is why every glen would be inhabited by fairies and the woods would equally be haunted because the magical creatures had access to the human world...

A.T. That's fascinating. I think that is what confuses people about my own writing. The fact the magic happens in an apparently real world and people are so used to having magic above or below and not incorporated into an everyday world.

M.G. When I recently re-opened *Pharos*, I noticed that there is a map at the beginning. Does landscape influence your writing?

A.T. Hugely. When I start writing the first thing that comes to me is an atmosphere, and the atmosphere has to be based on a location and the location gives the atmosphere. In *Justine* the atmosphere was London. In *Pandora's Box* it was mainly Las Vegas, the desert and America and in *Pharos* it was an island off the coast of Scotland. Landscape is paramount. I can't start writing until I have a landscape. It does not have to be a real landscape. It has to be a

landscape that I can see and feel and that's when my books begin.

M.G. Why did you choose the name *Pharos*?

A.T. 'Pharos' is Greek for 'light'. I wanted an abstract name because the book is dealing with metaphysical problems and I wanted the title to be quite elusive and illusive, so that was the title it had to have.

M.G. Did you know that Walter Scott travelled on a boat called *Pharos*?

A.T. Yes, I did. You're the first person to have picked upon that!

M.G. Was that casual?

A.T. I did want *Pharos* to have a Scottish heritage. It is set in Scotland after all. The map is based on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. It is a hybrid of my own drawings of Jacob's Rock and the map of *Treasure Island*. There are Scottish echoes throughout the book. It's funny you should have mentioned the title because only yesterday I noticed the Walter Scott book on my bookshelf.

M.G. How does the name Lucia fit in the novel?

A.T. Well, 'Lucia' means 'light' and Cameron is Cameron 'Black'. And I'm trying to invert the preconceptions of what is white and what is black. Even though her name means 'light', Lucia is the evil spirit of the slave ship. Cameron who is supposedly a true and spiritual man, a man aspiring to oneness with God, has actually a dark side to his nature. Names are terribly important to me, you can do so much with the name, not necessarily in an obvious way. I wanted a rather Scottish patriarchal name for my lighthouse keeper so Cameron Black seemed to be a strong name even though in the end he proved to be terribly weak.

M.G. Noah also has a very meaningful, strong name...

A.T. Someone setting out on a journey. I wanted him to be a kind of everyman, a man who was not particularly evil nor particularly virtuous... an archetype. Noah seemed to me to convey that kind hope, but also vulnerability. Noah is described as a drunkard in the Bible. Even though he was chosen by God he has faults, so I wanted a fallible everyman.

M.G. There is a lot of death in your novels. Death coexists with life. When Lucia has fever, in Pharos, Charlotte tending to her is described as 'an angel of death' and Lucia is also a 'sleeping beauty' at the beginning of the novel. She does not have any consciousness, she just lies there and likewise death haunts Noah from the beginning of his relationship with Pandora when he virtually resuscitates her, bringing her back from the dead, she is almost a corpse. Death is also a synonym of love and the obsession for beauty at the core of Justine. Could you tell me what is the relationship between love, beauty and death?

A.T. I suppose I see beauty as static, as fatal. In James's *Wings of the Dove*, where Milly sees a painting by Bronzino which looks like her, she is reminded of death. Hawthorne explores this idea too: how art is a kind of petrification, it freezes life. I am interested in images of deathly beauty. I do see life and death as coexisting and I suppose I have become progressively more conscious of my interest in death. In *Pandora's Box* and *Justine* death was a kind of an unconscious preoccupation, whereas in *Pharos* I was trying to examine it directly and look at our post-colonial inheritance, and also look at Scotland's responsibility for her past, our responsibility to our future and I suppose it is part of growing older myself and looking at the process of mortality. It does intrigue me and of course, when you start asking questions about death, you start to ask questions about life.

M.G. I find it hard to believe that human kind will ever discover what is after death. So preoccupations with death are inevitably connected with afterlife. No matter what religious beliefs are, it is in our nature to wonder about that unknown...

A.T. I don't think so much about afterlife, as I don't believe in one as such. Death reflects back our life back on us: if we die, why are we living? I tend to look at life as we are living it and try to look for a point or meaning in that.

M.G. There are also other forms of intermediate life that you refer to in your novels. *Pharos* is a ghost story. Juliette has a kind of vampiric aura about her and ghosts and vampires are both features of the in-between world, they are not alive and they are not completely dead. They are trapped. Are you interested in that unknown dimension?

A.T. I think they probably embody the questions I have about life and death and that is one way of exploring it. I don't read my horoscope. I would not necessarily say that ghosts exist or there is a psychic world. I do believe more in the power of the imagination. To me, that's where the ghosts are hiding.

M.G. Speaking of ghosts and hidden things, there are many hidden texts and cryptic messages in your work. Do you think that language is an enigma to a certain extent? Your characters cannot communicate and don't understand each other...

A.T. There is a wonderful book on Henry James called *Silence in Henry James*. Often what is important in life is that which is *not* said. The post-structuralists and the structuralists say that language constructs their world. I think that this is very naïve. I think that there are many worlds outside the one of language. Language as a way of communicating can be dangerous and it can shut you up so I'm not

like many writers who say that they are in love with words. I view words as dangerous, too, in many ways and I have to be careful how I use them and therefore I treat my words with respect and I'm not unconditionally in love with them.

M.G. I have a general question on criticism. The theoretical debate on fantasy is very much alive. Where do you think fantasy comes from and why do you, as a writer choose to write fantasy?

A.T. If you look at a lot of writing, it is where people's prejudices are confirmed. With fantasy you can do other things, perhaps make people question what they thought they knew. There is something liberating about fantasy. Your imagination is let loose and for me it's a very exciting world, because you can use new imagery, make new connections and look at emotions in a different way. Fantasy is a strange force.

M.G. How would you define the contemporary Scottish fantasy? Is Magic Realism a good definition or not?

A.T. Take for example John Burnside or Alan Warner. They do not deal so much in Magic Realism, but are rather taking risks with language and are less hidebound by a standard plot. I think Scottish writing tends to be more metaphysical. Look at the writings of Ali Smith. There is a philosophical aspect to Scottish writing which stems from the enlightenment... There is a willingness and an eagerness and a desperation to explore philosophical questions through fiction. Certainly Scottish writers do use the supernatural. Ali Smith uses ghosts and A.L. Kennedy does too. But a more conclusive or comprehensive generalisation would be to say that Scottish writing has a philosophical bent, inclusive of the supernatural but not confined to it.

M.G. Would you disagree that fantasy has to be escapist?

A.T. Yes, totally. On the contrary, fantasy can be very political. Look at Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The most satirical damning indictment of Communism and Fascism, if you wish. Total fantasy! Angela Carter uses fantasy to produce a 'Magic Toyshop', a wonderful exploration of adolescent sexuality all done through puppets. I think fantasy is a very effective way of looking at the contemporary world.

M.G. Although I think that there are a few different branches of fantasy, it's such a general term. I have so many problems with the 'f' word.

A.T. It's the same with science fiction: there is poor science fiction, and then there is J. G. Ballard.

M.G. And what about your current work? Any ideas you want to share?

A.T. After a false start, I've started on another book. I have a location for it. That is why I have started looking at the world of nature and how we try and tame nature and ourselves so it's about the uncivilised and the civilised.

M.G. Is it in the contemporary world?

A.T. I'm not quite sure. At the moment it looks like the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps the 1920s. I still haven't made up my mind.

M.G. Thank you.

A.T. Thank you.

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